

## People and places

### Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones

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Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones was President of the Medico-Psychological Association in 1906.

He was born in 1857 in Ynyscynhaiarn, Caernarvonshire, one of ten children. His father was the Reverend Thomas Jones, a Congregationalist Minister, and his mother the daughter of a Vicar. Robert was a scholar at Portmadoc, Aberystwyth and Wrexham. After a six months' apprenticeship to a Portmadoc doctor he went in 1876 as a student to St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. Acquiring a Doctorate in Medicine and Fellowships of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, he soon began his psychiatric career, serving at the Colney Hatch Asylum and the Royal Earlswood Institution, and from 1893 to 1916 was Medical Superintendent at the London County Council Asylum, Claybury. There, according to Brown (1955), while Frederick Mott was researching in the laboratory, Robert Jones instituted the novelties of psychiatric training for nurses, occupational therapy for patients and the acceptance of private patients.

In World War I he served as a Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel RAMC and afterwards was the first Consulting Physician in Mental Diseases to the London and Aldershot Commands and the American Red Cross Hospital for Officers, playing a large part in the treatment of shell shocked soldiers. His knighthood came in 1917 and two years later was rather curiously followed by a CBE award. He lectured at the Westminster as well as St Bartholomew's Hospital and was a "Professor of Physic". He served on an Archbishop of Canterbury's special committee on spiritual healing and at various times gave evidence to a departmental committee of the Privy Council to the Home Office about juvenile delinquency and to a Royal Commission on divorce and matrimonial causes (*Who was Who*, 1981).

He visited asylums in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Russia and Norway and wrote extensively about them and very many other subjects (*Journal of Mental Science*, 1909; 1923).

In 1903 he was President of the Section of Psychological Medicine of the British Medical Association, and for many years before his election to the presidency of the organisation which was then working its



*Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones*

way to the formation of our College he was its secretary. He delivered his presidential address to this body on 26 July 1906 (Jones, 1906). Its subject was the Evolution of Insanity, although it was really about the anthropology of insanity because, except for experiments on animals in Bologna in the 17th and 18th centuries, it did not mention any species other than human. In tracing insanity from Old Testament and Hippocratic times, he commented on many subjects which still concern us, such as nomenclature, classification, and stigma and outcome of mental illness. There was then an increased prevalence of general paralysis—"the scourge and the reproach to our treatment". Confer AIDS! He was sure, however, that syphilis alone was not the cause of general paralysis because in Malaya general paralysis was said to be exceptional but syphilis rampant. He postulated that "'stress' through the

conditions of modern life" contributed to the development of general paralysis and that the Malaysians had not reached "the stage of evolution in civilisation" in which they felt "stress". There is a parallel too in our controversies over testing for HIV infection in that he urged the prevention of syphilis but lamented "while conscientious objectors and other faddists make themselves heard, the Legislature is silent about infection from this disease, which saps the energy and vitality, not only of the actual victim but also of many innocent descendants". He thought that "over-stimulation in many directions induced by modern social conditions" contributed to insanity. One of these stimulants was alcohol but others were "as when ambition fires the over-worked brain, when the eager hand reaches to grasp the prize plucked away by some other competitor, and when the thousand environmental stimuli cause the brain to react innumerable times more frequently – even in the course of a single day – than formerly". As our latest Mental Health Act restricts us, his not being allowed to admit patients to hospital informally vexed him. He was angered too by allegations in *The Times* that asylum medical officers devoted neither thought nor time to professional work and were responsible for the accumulation of incurable insanity in the asylums. He maintained that there should be legislation for the "defective class", so that members of it should be protected against themselves and the control which they lacked should be supplied to them from without and he anticipated community care by aspiring that some of them could become "in a great measure self-supporting" or even "wholly self-sustaining".

He was interested in the organic versus sociological and psychological standpoints, paying generous tributes to Mott and others working in organic pathology while suggesting that "our prosperous Association" should endow an annual lectureship on the sociology of insanity.

He added the other barrel to his name to differentiate himself from another famous Welshman, Sir Robert Jones, the orthopaedic surgeon. John Armstrong had been the father of a relative of Margaret Roberts, whom Robert Armstrong-Jones had married in 1893. She was the daughter of Sir Owen Roberts, a lawyer and philanthropist, who owned Plâs Dinas, a large country house in extensive grounds on the site of an ancient fort, "Plâs" meaning "mansion" and "Dinas" "fort". Margaret inherited it from him and the Armstrong-Jones family spent about six weeks a year there. At those times they went every Sunday morning to the church

of Gwyndaf Hên, about a mile south, at Llanwnda, where my wife's father was vicar between 1916 and 1937. Much of the material in this section of my brief account comes from my wife's family and my *in situ* observations.

For their vacations Sir Robert, his family and servants travelled from London by train to a station near the church, where a chauffeur in green uniform and gaiters met them in a large car with a hood and the number plate RAJ 1. They arrived in similar style and a little late for church and sat on their own in the north transept. Sir Robert's favourite hymn was 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. On a raised part, known as the Mount, of the grounds of Plâs Dinas he hoisted a flag on a long pole to show that he was in residence. They held an annual fête in the immaculate and productive garden and one year there was a production on the Mount of a Shakespeare play at which my wife and a sister collected money for the church. However Susan, a small granddaughter of Sir Robert and the elder sister of Tony, now Lord Snowdon, crushed the bank notes, saying she wanted money, not paper. Lady Margaret took my mother-in-law to her boudoir in Plâs Dinas and insisted that her guest should smoke small scented cigarettes, which she hated.

The Welsh, to whom Sir Robert was a "brain surgeon", made him Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Caernarvonshire, Vice-President of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, a Welsh literary group, and an Honorary Welsh Doctor of Science.

He died at Plâs Dinas in 1943, Lady Margaret died a few months later and they are buried with Gwendy, the youngest of their three children, in the Gwyndaf Hên churchyard. In the north transept, near a stained glass window depicting Sir Robert's brother Thomas, who had served in India, is a memorial tablet to Sir Robert. It tells of his Knighthood of Grace of the Order of St John of Jerusalem and his having been High Sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1929 and a Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy.

## References

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