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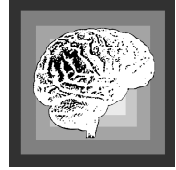
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The psychiatrist, the historian and *The Christian Watt Papers*

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The publication in the 1980s of The Christian Watt Papers brought to public attention the life of a previously unknown, long-term inmate of the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. Christian Watt's story inspired a play and a television documentary. This paper examines what the historical records reveal about Watt's life and how this compares with her own account.

Keywords: *Aberdeen Royal Asylum; Christian Watt; patient account*

With the publication in 1983 and 1988 of *The Christian Watt Papers* (Fraser, 1988) the life of a hitherto unknown Scottish fisherwoman and long-term asylum patient was thrust into the public gaze. The story of Christian Watt (1833–1923) struck a chord with the general population, and her life became the subject of a play and a documentary. Watt's biography has been taken as an heroic tale of one woman's struggle against adversity: against the harsh existence on the exposed coastline of north-east Scotland, battling with the elements, starvation and family tragedy. She has been perceived as a proto-feminist, rebelling against the lowly position of women in her community; as a socialist, prepared to stand up to the lords and industry bosses; and, as a devout Christian, who drew on the Bible to help her withstand her sorrows. Her mental breakdown in middle age is viewed as the inevitable outcome of a life of poverty and personal loss. The latter half of her life, spent in an Aberdeen asylum, is portrayed as a time of stoicism and resilience, during which Watt became one of the 'characters' of the institution.

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What, though, is the psychiatrist or historian to make of the life of Christian Watt? How are they to assess her story? Her case highlights the difficulties involved in psychiatric and historical interpretation, but it also underlines the similarities between the two activities. The work of the psychiatrist has been compared to that of the detective, in that they both try to make sense of a disparate collection of facts in order to reach a convincing explanation, either of a patient's predicament or of a crime (Beveridge, 1998a). One could equally well include the historian in this endeavour to construct a meaningful narrative out of the disorder of human experience, as Ludmilla Jordanova (2000) has shown in her book, *History in Practice*.

This paper will examine the material relating to Christian Watt, both from the psychiatric and the historical perspective, a process which will demonstrate the problems in reaching firm conclusions as to an individual's mental state and his or her role as an historical actor. Further, the artistic perspectives offered by the play, *Precarious Living* (Hardie, 1985), and the drama documentary, *Caorstaigh (Kirsty)*¹ will also be examined. They provide yet another response to the life and mental breakdown of Christian Watt.

What do we actually know about the life of Christian Watt? First and foremost, there is her own account, written in pencil in a clear hand, and seemingly composed in her later years.² She recounts that two young male patients, a doctor and a lawyer, encouraged her to write about her experiences. They 'shewed me how to keep a journal', she records, 'and to make notes as something came in my head to revive my memory, and to write it down before I forgot' (Fraser, 1988: 112). She observes that patients were not allowed quill pens as it was feared they might use them as weapons or drink the ink. Instead she wrote with a pencil. Elsewhere she mentions that Dr Reid, the Asylum superintendent, started her writing 'to swacken her fingers' (Fraser, 1988: 136), apparently after her stroke in 1913. Seumas Lobban (1994, 1996), who has studied the history of the Aberdeen Asylum, observes that there is some scholarly doubt as to the complete authenticity of the Watt papers, the claim being made that they were written by one of her descendants. However, he concludes that, if they were not written by Christian herself, they are a 'remarkably good example of oral history being passed from one generation to another' (Lobban, 1994: 161). Certainly, the narrative contains detailed information about family matters and specific descriptions of asylum life, which suggests that if Watt did not actually write the memoir, her reminiscences informed what was written.

The handwritten account has been almost entirely reproduced in *The Christian Watt Papers*, although the sequence of the passages has been rearranged by the editor, Sir David Fraser,³ who also provides extensive background commentary, and at times 'corrects' Christian's observations. The editorial comment inevitably frames the picture of Christian Watt in a particular way. For Fraser (1988: xv), she is a 'noble woman', who 'radiated courage', and the reader is thus invited to see her story in very positive terms.

Relevant records, in addition to the *Papers*, are the baptism, marriage and death records,⁴ and also the case notes and lunacy certificates⁵ relating to her admissions to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum as well as the administrative records. There are the poor law and legal records, the customs and excise records of boat ownership, and the local newspapers.⁶ There are brief references to Christian in her granddaughter's biography (Sutherland, 1994), and lastly there is the spoken testimony of her great-grandson, James Marshall, who, although he did not know Christian, is aware of the family stories about her and still owns the home at Broadsea where Christian grew up and spent much of her adult life. The home contains paintings, photographs and other memorabilia relating to Christian and her family.

Brief biographical sketch

Our main source for biographical details is Christian Watt herself, and we obviously have to be aware of the limitations of relying on one source, especially when it is autobiography. Christian Watt was born around 24 February 1833 at 72 Broadsea, Fraserburgh, and was the seventh of eight children. Both her parents worked in the herring industry. Her family was distantly related, through illegitimate birth, to the Saltouns, clan chiefs of the Frasers. She grew up in a tradition of nationalism, Jacobitism and Episcopalianism. She had sympathies with the Dissent movement, which criticized the Kirk for upholding the established order and neglecting the working classes. She was also greatly influenced by her grandmother, who told her stirring stories about the history of Scotland. Christian's family was poor, and all ten of them lived in a small cottage on the edge of the North Sea. From the age of eight, she helped the family with the work of the fishing, and six months later she was also working as a domestic servant. In 1843 she became a maid to the dowager Lady Saltoun and, as a result of her good work, she was rewarded with a dictionary. In her own account (Fraser, 1988: 22) and also in the drama documentary, this episode is emphasized as an example of Christian's thirst for knowledge. It also fits with the Scottish fondness for the tale of the 'lad or lass o' pairts' who makes use of education to rise above adversity.

From 1844 onwards, Christian accompanied the Broadsea fishermen on their summer expeditions to the west coast of Scotland, in order to cook for them. She recounts that in later years⁷ she personally confronted Lord Macdonald of Sleat, while he was walking with a 'party of toffs', about his part in the Highland Clearances. She said to him, 'You are lower than the outscourings of any pigsty, causing all that human suffering to innocent people' (Fraser, 1988: 27). How do we interpret this? Did it really happen? We only have Christian's account. We have no means of corroborating it. Writing about the event in later life, did she imagine it or was she retelling it the way she would have liked it to have happened? If it did happen, does it show Christian as a fearless fighter for justice, unbowed by those in authority?

Certainly, this is how Christian portrays it in her own account, and it is also the way the documentary relates the episode. The Buchan people had a long tradition of radicalism, and they have been described as contemptuous of privilege or rank (Masters, 1995: 30–1).⁸ Is Christian's outburst perfectly understandable in this context? Or could it be seen as evidence of mental disinhibition – of the early signs of the full-blown 'mania' that she was to develop sometime later? After all, how common, even in radical times, was it to approach strangers and proceed to harangue them, especially if there was a wide social divide between the two participants? These questions defy a conclusive answer.

In a similar episode, Christian describes an encounter with Lord Lovat, in whose house she was then employed and whose son, she claims, had a romantic interest in her. She tells how she treated the noble lord and his wife to a lengthy diatribe about the hypocrisies of the aristocracy and condemned them for being capitalist exploiters of the masses. In parting, she tells Lady Lovat, 'your heart is as cold as your backside is reputed to be' (Fraser, 1988: 57). Once again does this episode represent a bold socialist heroine standing up to the ruling class? Is there a possibility that she may have been sexually assaulted – had she been raped? We cannot tell conclusively, and certainly Christian herself claims that she was still a virgin at this period. Does the encounter demonstrate that Christian was mentally unstable, or is it, as Lobban (1994: 161–2) suspects, a fanciful version of events long-past?

In 1849 the Duchess of Leeds hired Christian to work as domestic servant in her house in London where she stayed for several months, taking in the sights, such as Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, on her days off. In 1856 she travelled to America in order to collect money from the legacy of her recently-deceased brother. She worked as a domestic servant for a wealthy New York family and spent some time exploring the city. In her memoir, she wrote sympathetically about the plight of the negroes, comparing their impoverished and downtrodden lot to her own (Fraser, 1988: 62). Such passages are attractive to those wishing to see Christian as a socialist heroine. One might wonder if a person from Christian's background really did manage to travel to London and America, and again we have to emphasize that our only source for this period is Christian herself.

She returned to Scotland eight months later and in 1858 she married James Sim, a fisherman at Broadsea, in a ceremony conducted under the aegis of the Evangelical Union Church. The couple had ten children. The ensuing years were hard as they tried to make a living from the sea and raise a large family in cramped conditions. In August 1874 their second son, Peter, was drowned at sea,⁹ and Christian dated the onset of her mental breakdown from this point (Fraser, 1988: 95). Another son, Joseph, died from tetanus in September 1876, and in the following year her husband was also drowned at sea. In November 1877 she was admitted for the first time to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. Her third admission in 1879 was to be her last

and she remained in the Asylum until her death on 20 June 1923 at the age of ninety. The cause of death was chronic myocarditis and arteriosclerosis.¹⁰

The asylum record

With Christian's entry into the Aberdeen Royal Asylum, we gain another perspective on her story. The Asylum case notes are unfortunately extremely brief, but they do provide a reasonable account of the medical opinion of her mental condition at the time of her three admissions. Later in her asylum career, the details of her early clinical history were summarized and some new information was added. Lobban (1994: 155) has observed that the standard of case-note recording deteriorated between 1884 and 1917 under the superintendship of Dr William Reid, and speculates that he may have been less diligent than his predecessor, Dr Jamieson. However, in Reid's defence it should be noted that patient numbers rose greatly from 500 in Jamieson's time to almost 900 in Reid's.¹¹ In addition, from 1890 onwards there was also a county branch to supervise, and latterly there was loss of staff to military service.

The Aberdeen Asylum was established in 1800, assuming the title of Royal Asylum in 1852.¹² It catered for both private and pauper patients. It was typical of nineteenth-century Scottish asylums in its treatment regime, which combined moral therapy and the use of medication. Lobban (1994), who analysed a sample of patients admitted between 1821 and 1900, found that 75% were discharged, while 25% remained in the Asylum until death.

Christian was first admitted to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum on 15 November 1877. She was 44 years old, a widow, and her occupation was described as fisherwoman. She was reported to be 'in a state of great excitement, violent, and incoherent in her talk ... [and] labours also under delusions of a religious nature'.¹³ The certifying doctor observed: 'She informed me that I was her saviour. She poured out a volley of abuse of a most dreadful description on all and sundry especially her own clergyman. Her conduct was most immoral (she is usually a very quiet religious woman).'¹⁴ The case note summary adds: 'She poured several bottles of paraffin bought especially for the purpose over the floor of her house and set fire to it. She also anointed a hen with paraffin and roasted it alive "for a sacrifice" and wished to offer up her son'.¹⁵ It is interesting, and perhaps no coincidence, that the son who was to be sacrificed was called Isaac.

This was said to be her first attack, and of a few days' duration. The cause was said to be the death of her husband three months previously, and the diagnosis was 'mania'. By 28 November, it was recorded that the excitement had subsided and she was now talking rationally'.¹⁶ It was noted that for a considerable period prior to admission, she had been breastfeeding, and it was judged that this was 'in all probability the cause of her present illness'.¹⁷ On 29 December 1877, she was discharged 'Recovered'.

However, on 29 January 1879 she was readmitted. The first Medical Certificate stated that she was: ‘... in a state of passionate excitement she had threatened to cut the throats of her children with a knife’.¹⁸ The second certificate stated: ‘She has broken all the windows in the house ... cursing and swearing violently, said she saw “the fairies of God” & had several religious delusions ... threatening to destroy her family, had destroyed a quantity of furniture’.¹⁹ The case notes²⁰ recorded that she was in ‘a highly excited state talking in a loud and incoherent manner principally on religious subjects’. Again, a diagnosis of ‘mania’ was made. The next case note entry on 20 June 1879 recorded that she ‘has been quite well for some time past’, and on 25 June, she was discharged ‘Recovered’.

On 17 September 1879, she was readmitted. The first Medical Certificate²¹ reads:

I found her lying in bed going through some dumb buffoonery. On speaking to her she ... requested me to pray for her then suddenly burst forth with a torrent of most obscene & blasphemous language ... she also threatened to murder her son or anyone who would dare to prevent her doing what she chose ... Her son and daughter informed that she had thrown one or more dishes at the younger children also attacked & slightly tore her son’s face. She has been perambulating the village naked.

The second Medical Certificate²² stated: ‘Talking incessantly; filthy obscene language; thinks she is to be married to the Zulu King’. The attack was said to be of a week’s duration. The case note recorded: ‘She is maniacally excited; talking almost constantly in an incoherent manner using obscene and blasphemous language’.²³ Yet again the diagnosis was ‘mania’. This time she was not discharged.

The next case note entries²⁴ occur nearly thirty years later. On 10 July 1908 it was recorded: ‘Works in the kitchen; worships the sun etc.’. The next entry on 1 June 1911 is more informative: ‘Works in the kitchen and wanders about the place. Is delusional and fires off aphorisms at everybody. Has curious religious ideas and stands gazing at the sun through her apron. Dresses fantastically. Is becoming frail’. A further entry on 6 October 1913 records ‘No change’. In the final set of entries,²⁵ the first, in November 1921, comments on her worsening physical condition: ‘Is becoming very frail and is confined to bed. Is considerably enfeebled but still spirited in conversation’. Two further entries in 1922 and 1923 chart her continued physical decline, followed by a final note: ‘DIED. 20:6:23’.

Christian Watt’s account

Perhaps not surprisingly, Christian’s account differs from the Asylum record. Of her first two admissions, she claims she was asked by her doctor to go into the Asylum for a ‘rest’ (Fraser, 1988: 106).²⁶ She said she was glad to accept

because her life at the time was so harsh. She was finding it increasingly difficult to provide for her children. In the period leading up to her final admission, Christian's life was becoming even more precarious. She maintained that she was shunned because of her mental history and this affected her ability to find work and provide for her family. She did find a post in a fishhouse, but lost her job when someone complained that former asylum patients should not be working with knives. Following this, she gathered whelks from the shore in order to sell them. She and her family faced near-starvation. Christian had applied to emigrate to America but was turned down because of her history of insanity. She recounts that she was 'plunged into a deep depression', and continues:

I knew the exact moment my reason broke. I struggled to hang onto it, it was distinct as a butter plate breaking on the floor. A bottle of paraffin lay near the hen-house, I remember pouring it over the small shed and my son George struggling with me. Onty's Sandy and his wife put me to bed. I heard like a tune playing in my head – I was absolutely worn out. I was not responsible for my actions . . . Two doctors and a policeman came and I was certificated as insane. (p. 115)

She describes her children screaming and clinging to her skirts as she was 'hustled' out of the house (p. 117). The case notes and the 1877 lunacy certificate place this episode with the paraffin at the time of the first admission. Immediately prior to her description of the paraffin episode, Christian observes that 'it was a freezing day getting towards Christmas' (p. 115), and this would fit better with her first admission, which was mid-November 1877 rather than the third in mid-September 1879.

Generally, the Asylum records paint a much more disturbed picture of Christian's mental condition than is to be found in her own account. There are several reasons why this might be. Christian was writing some time after the events. She may have forgotten or preferred to forget how disturbed she was. She may have been reluctant to recount some of the potentially embarrassing details. Equally, the medical account should also be interrogated for evidence of distortion. The doctors may have emphasized the wilder aspects of her behaviour to justify the need for her continuing compulsory detention in an asylum.

The medical record is mainly a description of Christian's behaviour, although the notes make mention that bereavement and the strain of child-rearing may have played a part in her breakdown. Nineteenth-century British alienism held that insanity was primarily a disease of the brain and often hereditary in origin (Clark, 1981: 271–312). Curiously, though, neither of the 1879 petitions mention heredity, and it is Christian herself who records that her family had a history of insanity and feeble-mindedness.²⁷ Whether the physicians failed to enquire about heredity or whether they were told that there was no family history of insanity is not clear.

Christian tried to make sense of her experience of mental derangement by reference to what was happening in her life at the time. Both the play and the documentary take Christian's lead in downplaying the severity of her mental disturbance and seeing her breakdown as understandable, and perhaps inevitable, in the light of her personal circumstances.

In attempting to understand her mental breakdown, Christian observes that 'If I had been less a thinker and a more dull person' (Fraser, 1988: 107), she might not have become ill. She articulated a common perception that it was only the more intellectually sophisticated who were vulnerable to mental mishap. In another passage, she writes: 'It seems under mental stress scholarly people are affected to a greater extent' (p. 135). Christian also came to see her suffering in a religious context. She compared her plight to 'Christ the Man of sorrow' (p. 106). The religious aspect of Christian's case presents problems in interpretation. How much, if any, of her religious preoccupation may be accounted for by her mental condition? We know that she came from a background of Episcopalianism and Dissent, and that her marriage ceremony was within the Evangelical church.

Christian seemed to feel that she had a special religious purpose. For example, she writes: 'I knew my landing in the Asylum was all part of my fiery trials . . . It was all part of God's plan' (p. 113). Elsewhere she observes: 'I could see God's purpose for my life was to speak to the Medical Profession for so many doctors are atheists. The Universities often are responsible' (p. 125). At the end of her memoirs, she writes: 'My purpose has been to shed light in a dark place' (p. 155). These passages could be read as evidence of grandiosity. However, they are perfectly in keeping with an evangelical perspective, which saw resignation to suffering as Christian obedience to the Divine Will. At a time of social trauma in Scotland, Evangelicism provided spiritual certainty by concentrating the mind on the struggle for grace and election. As Devine (1999: 372) has observed: 'the miseries of this life were not therefore simply to be endured but were a necessary agony for those who wished to attain eternal salvation in the next.'

On the other hand, Christian does not seem to have been excessively religious prior to her illness – at least as far as one can ascertain. She does make mention of the Disruption and attending the Congregational Sunday School and the bible class. She also records that while in London she went regularly to the Kirk of Scotland (Fraser, 1988: 24). Lobban (1994: 162–3) notes that in her account of her early life, she makes few religious references, and it is only after she is admitted to the asylum that she introduces biblical quotations. It may be thought that her first name – Christian – had a particular religious significance, but in fact this was a common name for girls in the north-east of Scotland. Of course it may have underlined her belief that her purpose was to shed light in dark places.

Christian's acute breakdowns were marked by religious delusions and a preoccupation with religious matters. The brief case note entry towards the

end of her life refers somewhat critically to her 'spouting aphorisms', being deluded and worshipping the sun. Her editor, David Fraser (1988: xiv), describes her as a 'demented prophetess' in the passages where she gives her commentary on world events. Christian also describes several episodes when she harangues others with biblical injunctions. None of which is to suggest that an interest in religion is a sign of insanity, but in Christian's case there is undoubtedly the possibility that the intense religious focus of her later years was a manifestation of mental disorder. Once again, it is not possible to provide a definitive answer. Whatever we decide about the nature of her religious beliefs, it does appear that they helped her to cope with her ordeal.

Life in the asylum

We have seen that the official medical account of Christian's forty years in the Aberdeen Asylum amounts to a few pages. Thus our main guide to this period is Christian herself. Roy Porter (1987) characterized patients' accounts of their time in an asylum as one of protest and complaint. In contrast, Christian gives a largely positive description of her time at the Aberdeen Asylum. She calls the institution a 'haven' (Fraser, 1988: 111) and she praises the doctors for their kindness and wisdom. She speaks highly of the nurses whose work she feels is onerous and unappreciated.

Nevertheless, her first impressions were not auspicious. On admission to the Aberdeen Asylum, she noted the 'endless corridors' (p. 107) and locked doors. She describes her first sight of the dining room: 'Not even the pangs of sheer hunger could have forced me to eat in the dining room . . . Patients were gulping and stomaching their porridge in such a slovenly and distasteful manner . . .' (p. 107). Initially, she did not want her children to visit her, as she did not think it was the 'sort of place' for children' (p. 107).

However, Christian eventually found a role for herself in the Asylum. Like all pauper patients she was put to work. She states that she was employed as a fishwife and made regular trips into Aberdeen to buy fish at the market, where she was able to become acquainted with the local tradespeople and enjoy the banter and gossip (p. 125). Significantly, in contrast to her experience in her own community, she maintained that she was not shunned. She also worked as a laundrywoman and produced embroidery for the city shops. As she wrote, 'I was now happy to be the fishwife and laundrymaid of the Asylum, which had been home to me for years' (p. 138).

Christian's account suggests that she had a great deal of freedom and that she was given the responsibility of buying fish on behalf of the Asylum. However, existing records cast some doubt on this. The Asylum's accounts reveal that around £300 worth of fish and poultry was bought annually.²⁸ Unlike many of the other provisions it was not contracted for, but according to the printed regulations as issued in 1863, one of the tasks of the House

Steward was 'to purchase, under the direction of the acting sub-committee, such articles as are not furnished by contract'.²⁹

Unfortunately there are no surviving cash books or ledgers to show how the fish was bought. In his report for 1892,³⁰ Dr Reid observed: '... my convictions are greatly in favour of purchase from the open market, not only on account of quality and price, but because there is thereby a means of obtaining a variation of dietary . . . Of course the main element of success must lie in the purchaser'. It does not seem especially likely that he would trust a patient to undertake such a task and do business on behalf of the Asylum. It seems more likely that, if Christian did indeed go to the fishmarket, she went in the company of an Asylum employee. Asylum records cast doubt on some other observations that Christian makes in her memoirs. For example, she mentions the Asylum doing laundry for the big hotels and boarding houses in Aberdeen, and also work for the railways (pp. 112, 135). Of the former, she writes, 'This helped to bring in an income for running the place' (p. 112). However there is no record of this money in the Asylum accounts.

Christian took a keen interest in Asylum life, and her memoirs contain numerous vignettes of fellow-patients. She also claims that the doctors asked her advice about patients from her part of the world. We do not know if this is true, but it is certainly possible and, if so, would have strengthened Christian's self-image as a wise, senior member of the Asylum community. In her last years, she pictures herself holding court to a procession of visitors, including aristocrats, students looking for research topics, and friends and family. Alternative accounts of these years are sparse. As we have seen, the few entries in the case notes comment on her bizarre dress-sense, her preoccupation with religion and her increasing physical frailty. We might have expected a mention of her in the Asylum reports, which occasionally referred to notable inmates, especially at the time of their death, but a search of the reports reveals no reference to Christian. However, by the time of her death, there had been a change in superintendship. Dr Dods Brown had been there for only five years, a time when she was failing and perhaps not quite the character she had once been or imagined herself to be. In her book, Christian's grand-daughter (Christian Watt Marshall) makes occasional reference to Christian; she mentions taking her out to tea in Aberdeen and then seeing her back to the gates of the Asylum (Sutherland, 1994: 59).

It does appear that Christian became dependent on the Asylum and was unable to envisage a life for herself outside it. When, sometime after 1 February 1917, her son asked her to come and live with him, Christian preferred to stay in the Asylum, partly because she could not face the memories lying latent at Broadsea, but also because she saw her role as looking after wounded soldiers from the Great War.

His sons were gone and the single daughters had to travel to the fishings

to earn their living, so how could I possibly sit alone in that house with all those memories? . . . No . . . my job was in the Asylum which was quickly filling with shell shocked young loons (Fraser, 1988: 138).

In contrast to this last statement, Dr Reid, the medical superintendent, noted the small number of such cases which had been admitted to the Asylum. Writing in January 1916, he stated that 'the war cannot be said to have yet had any remarkable influence on the number of admissions'.³¹ In his report of 1917³² he spoke of the excellent arrangements which had been provided in war hospitals for the reception of mental and nervous cases from the front. He explained how it was only when their symptoms were protracted that they were transferred to their local asylum, and he added, 'It is surprising that only four such patients have been admitted to this Asylum'. The report for 1918³³ was compiled by the interim superintendent and contains no comments about the war or service patients.

In 1919 Dr Dods Brown³⁴ noted that 23 service patients were under treatment. The annual report showed 17 males being admitted due to 'stress of war service', but this was usually individually over the course of the year. However, on 28 April 1918, a batch of 14 service patients was transferred temporarily to Aberdeen from Stirling District Asylum as that hospital had been taken over by the naval authorities.³⁵ They remained in the Aberdeen Asylum until being returned to Stirling in October 1918.³⁶ This is the only event which would seem to equate with Christian's claim that the Asylum was filling up with 'shell shocked young loons'.

Christian's largely positive account of the Aberdeen Asylum can be contrasted with that of another inmate, Mary Coutts³⁷ (1909), whose pamphlet, *Britain's Siberia. The High Statistics of Insanity Explained by A Certified Lunatic*, condemned the institution as a prison and railed against what she perceived as her wrongful confinement. Coutts, who was judged by her doctors to suffer from delusional insanity, had two admissions to the Aberdeen Asylum, one in 1908 and again in 1913. In her pamphlet, which she wrote between admissions, she complained that there was no treatment. She declared: 'The patients are simply prisoners, leading the most desolate and unnatural lives . . . calculated to keep them insane and drive them more so' (Coutts, 1909: 2). She dismissed the attendants as 'ignorant and tactless men and women, whose strongest recommendations are their capabilities in the way of brute force' (Coutts, 1909: 3), and she charged them with assaulting the inmates on an almost daily basis. She complained that the patients were exploited and made to work in order to ensure the smooth running of the Asylum (Coutts, 1909: 3). As Lobban (1994: 176) has pointed out, Coutts came from a more financially secure background than Christian. Her husband was a cashier and she was a private patient. Used to a more comfortable and affluent way of life than Christian, she may have found the atmosphere of noise and disorder much more of a shock.

However, Coutts's largely negative view of the Asylum is more in keeping with the generality of inmates' accounts of institutional life (see Beveridge, 1998*b*; Porter, 1987).

Stigma

An important theme in the *Papers* is that of stigma. Christian describes the negative attitudes of Fraserburgh people to insanity, and felt that their hostility made it impossible for her to survive in the community. 'Being in the asylum is a terrible stigma' (Fraser, 1988: 108), she wrote, adding: 'When I came home I found folk constantly trying to shun me as if I had leprosy. The usual pattern was to smile and be pleasant for a moment, then make some kind of excuse they were in an awful hurry to do something.' She found that doors were shut in her face when it was discovered she had been in an asylum. As a result, she was unable to make a livelihood. On a visit to sell fish at Lady Anderson's house she overheard the mistress tell her servant; 'Under no circumstances give her tea or anything that might encourage her. We can't have a madwoman coming about the place' (p. 108). Later she adds, 'I felt very sad because nobody was going to trust me anymore, even my bairns' chums at school no longer came.' (p.111).

Christian maintained that the people of the Buchan fishing villages and towns were far less tolerant than those in Aberdeen. She wrote: 'Aberdeen folk have greater tolerance of mental illness than have the folk of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, for in the hospital a Buchanhaven wife told me she met with exactly the same treatment' (p. 114).³⁸ As Lobban (1994: 168–70) suggests, this observation can be interpreted in two ways. Either the small villages were less tolerant than the cosmopolitan city, or Christian was no longer trusted in and around Broadsea because of the erratic and dangerous behaviour she exhibited during attacks. In the larger Aberdeen community, few people would have been familiar with her past. Also, if her illness was known to people in Aberdeen, they would also know that she was an Asylum patient and there may have been the expectation that any deterioration in her condition would be acted on and she would be confined to the Asylum. In addition, she may always have been accompanied by a member of Asylum staff or family.

Did Christian stay in the Asylum because the outside community was hostile to her, or was it because she was too disturbed to be discharged? The Fraserburgh Parochial Board had access to beds in the lunatic wards at the Buchan Combination Poorhouse at Maud. If Christian had been at all settled, it would be anticipated that the Board would have applied for her transfer to Maud. Dr Reid, in his 1892 report, set out the conditions relating to the appropriate accommodation of chronic pauper patients.³⁹ The fact that she remained in Aberdeen the whole time suggests that her condition fell into the category of cases requiring special attention in an asylum.

Her granddaughter provides an insight into the family's perspective. She

writes:

For some reason she didn't like her own folk. She had a strange illness that only those who have encountered it could understand. Many scorned us for allowing the doctors to put her into Cornhill, but we had done all we could. When she came home it was alright for a while, but then she would start feeding papers up the chimney in a desire for tidiness. It was impossible to sleep easy during her visits. (Sutherland, 1994: 26)

Of course the granddaughter's account describes a time in the 1870s that she, herself, could not have known or would have been too young to know. It seems likely that she was repeating the accepted family narrative of events.

The case notes suggest that Christian was violent and dangerous when she was insane, and it is understandable that her family and local community were apprehensive about her. Thus the issue of stigma is complex. Christian's account does suggest that several people in her circle were intolerant of the mentally ill, but, on the other hand, she does appear to have been very unpredictable when unwell.

Artistic perspectives

In both the play, *Precarious Living* by Amy Hardie, and the drama documentary, *Caorstaidh*, the life of Christian Watt is portrayed. While it would be wholly misguided to examine these works for historical or psychiatric accuracy, they are interesting in the approach they take to the life of Christian Watt and more particularly her breakdown. They both have a very sympathetic attitude to their subject, and generally adopt Christian's view of events. Thus she is pictured as a fiery champion of the oppressed. Both the play and the documentary re-enact Christian's outspoken attacks on the aristocracy, and it is clear that she is to be perceived as a doughty class fighter, who tells the toffs some unwelcome truths. Her life is seen as one of unremitting toil and tragedy, and her eventual breakdown is seen as inevitable. Both the play and the documentary view Christian's mental disturbance as understandable. The play does allude to her family history of insanity, but seems to suggest that this hereditary legacy also marks Christian out as a singular character. The play has her son observe that she is not mentally ill and has never been. It portrays the asylum as a place where Christian has been silenced. The play could be read as the story of a fearless rebel, who is eventually crushed by the system. A final scene reveals Christian to have adapted to the institution and to prefer it to the outside world.

Conclusion

One of the many unanswered questions about Christian Watt is why she spent over forty years in the Aberdeen Asylum. The extremely sparse case notes give little clue, although they do suggest that, even in her last years, she

was perceived as somewhat odd. Several explanations can be advanced. First, was she considered too insane and dangerous to be discharged? Lobban's (1994) finding that three-quarters of patients were eventually discharged indicates that the Asylum was more than willing to let patients go. The fact that she was never sent to the lunatic wards of her local poorhouse indicates that medical staff felt she was unfit to be transferred. It would certainly have been less costly to the Parochial authorities to maintain her in the poorhouse.

A second explanation for her long stay is that she may have become institutionalized: immersed in the Asylum world, was she no longer able to function outside its walls? Like some other long-stay patients, for example, John Willis Mason (Barfoot and Beveridge, 1993), she seems to have found a niche for herself and enjoyed being one of the Asylum 'characters'. In Christian's case, it could be argued that her life outside the institution was so bleak that the Asylum provided a refuge. By her own account, her son offered to take her home but she declined. Whether this was, in fact, a viable option and whether the authorities would have agreed, we do not know.

It could also be contended that Christian recovered her sanity, but that the attitudes of her local community made it impossible for her to go back. The sketchy documentation makes it impossible to reach a definitive answer, but it seems likely that many factors contributed to her prolonged stay in the Asylum: institutionalization, her continuing bouts of insanity, and the negative response of her immediate society.

In her discussion of the practice of history, Jordanova (2000: 97–100) rejects the notion that the task of the historian is to search for a single 'truth', which she feels is unattainable; but she also rejects the view that all interpretations of historical events are equally valid. Instead, she prefers to think in terms of reaching a 'reliable' account of the past. Psychiatrists, too, it has been argued, have to steer a course between imagining they can reach a final irrevocable 'truth' about a patient's condition, and being paralysed by the belief that all explanations carry equal weight (Beveridge, 1998a).

The difficulty for both the psychiatrist and the historian in the case of Christian Watt, is in reconciling the different sides of the story, of unpicking what is likely or verifiable from possible fantasy and delusion. Our main guide is Christian herself, and as Jordanova (2000: 97–100) has observed: when we are confronted with the voices of the oppressed, we tend to be less critical and see their voices as somehow more 'authentic' than other sources. These voices can be compelling and they can be granted privileges on emotional grounds. Christian Watt's account presents this danger, because she encompasses several aspects of being an oppressed figure: being female, working class and mad. We have seen how the narrative of the oppressed heroine has passed readily into the public domain via drama, documentary and David Fraser's introduction to *The Christian Watt Papers*. This paper has suggested that the picture is more complex and that caution should be exercised before reaching firm conclusions.

Notes

1. *Caorstaidh (Kirsty)*, a series of programmes based on the book *The Christian Watt Papers* by David Fraser. Episode 1: *Fairge agus Foirneart (Sea and Oppression)*; Episode 2: *Ceumaman Aotrom (Light Steps)*; Episode 3: *Deireadh an Iasgaich (The End of the Fishing)*, Lochran Media Ltd, 1994.
2. Christian Watt's manuscript, property of James Marshall, Broadsea.
3. David Fraser is one of the Frasers of Philorth, about whom Christian Watt wrote and to whom she was related. She knew five generations of the family.
4. Old Parochial Register, Parish of Fraserburgh, County of Aberdeen, 26 February 1833: 'James Watt Fisherman in Broadsea, and Helen Noble his Spouse had a Daughter baptized and named Christian in presence of James and Alexr Watt both in Broadsea'; Register of Marriages for the Parish of Fraserburgh, County of Aberdeen: 'On second day of December 1858, at Broadsea, Fraserburgh, Marriage solemnized between us according to the Forms of the Evangelical Union Church, signed James Sim & signed Christian Watt'; Register of Deaths for the District of Rubislaw in the Burgh of Aberdeen: 'Christian Sim, 1923 June Twentieth 4 hr 30 min, Royal Mental Hospital, Aberdeen'.
5. Northern Health Services Archives: lunacy certificates, GRHB 2/5/1 (1879); the register of lunatics, GRHB 2/3/11; case notes, GRHB 2/4/17, GRHB 2/4/33, GRHB 2/4/35 and GRHB 2/4/60; and asylum register of deaths, GRHB 2/3/39; also National Archives of Scotland: Mental Welfare Commission, Notices of Admission, November 1877, MC 2/224, No 30939.
6. Aberdeen City Archives, Old Aberdeen: Minutes of Fraserburgh Board, AC6/27/7, Fraserburgh Parochial Board General Register of Poor 1865–1888 AC6/27/17; The National Archives of Scotland: Aberdeen Sheriff Court, Register of Inventories, January to June 1879, SC 1/36/84, folio 57; National Archives of Scotland: Customs and Excise Records for Fraserburgh, Register for Shipping 1869–1903, CE 66/11/1.
7. The clearances on Macdonald's Sleat lands seem to have taken place between 1853 and 1854 so the encounter must have occurred during her last visits to the fishing before her marriage.
8. Masters' book is on Dennis Nilsen who came from the same area as Christian Watt. He describes the Buchan people as standing up to authority.
9. Christian (Fraser, 1988: 95–6) refers to the eight shillings in wages due to her son, Peter, being brought to the family by Captain Cowie and later being given by her husband to the funds of the children's hospital in Aberdeen. Peter died in August 1874, her husband in 1877. The children's hospital opened in September 1877 and its first report lists contributors to 31 December 1877. The only donation of 8s. came from the Ebenezer Mission Sabbath School in Aberdeen although several donations of up to £1 were given anonymously and there was also a sum of £6 being 'sums received during the years 1868–74 by Miss Martha Milne from parties interested in the Establishment of a Children's Hospital in Aberdeen'. All of which suggests that Christian's account may have been what she would have liked to have done rather than what actually happened.
10. Register of Deaths, see Note 5.
11. Annual Reports of the Aberdeen Royal Lunatic Asylum, 1881–1920, GRHB 2/8/6–9.
12. For background, see: Dods Brown, 1939: 41–9; Lobban, 1994, 1996; Reid, 1914.
13. GRHB 2/4/17, 11.
14. GRHB 2/4/35, 91. Transcription of Medical Certificate into case notes.
15. *Ibid.* This summary was prepared after the original case note entry, and the quoted passage adds extra information, not contained in the original entry.
16. GRHB 2/4/17, 11.

17. *Ibid.* Her last child, Charlotte, had been born on 15 July 1876, and would therefore have been about 16 months at the time of Christian's first admission.
18. GRHB 2/5/1 (1879). Medical Certificate No. I. Completed by Dr AC Grieve.
19. GRHB 2/5/1 (1879). Medical Certificate No. II. Completed by Dr TWA Napier.
20. GRHB 2/4/17, 11.
21. GRHB 2/5/1 (1879). Medical Certificate No. I. Completed by Dr W Ferguson.
22. GRHB 2/5/1 (1879). Medical Certificate No II. Completed by Dr J Mellis.
23. GRHB 2/4/17, 11.
24. GRHB 2/4/35, 92.
25. GRHB 2/4/60.
26. As Fraser (1988) is cited frequently in this and the next two sections, page numbers only are given below, except where there may be ambiguity following other references.
27. In Fraser (1988: 82), Watt writes that five descendants of her grandmother were mentally ill. On p. 81, she comments that she thought her grandmother was a bit mad and describes her as being often high but not insane.
28. Annual Reports of the Aberdeen Royal Lunatic Asylum, 1881–1920, GRHB 2/8/6–9.
29. GRHB 2/10/16. Regulations of the Royal Lunatic Asylum of Aberdeen, 1863.
30. GRHB 2/8/7 (1892), 20.
31. GRHB 2/8/9 (1915), 26.
32. GRHB 2/8/9 (1917), 12.
33. GRHB 2/8/9 (1918).
34. GRHB 2/8/9 (1919), 7.
35. GRHB 2/2/18 minutes of Asylum Board of Directors, 21 March, 18 April and 3 May 1918.
36. GRHB 2/2/18 minutes of Asylum Board of Directors, 7 November 1918.
37. Although the pamphlet was published anonymously, the name Mrs Coutts is mentioned on p. 13.
38. Buchanhaven is a village near Peterhead.
39. GRHB 2/8/7 (1892), 19. There is a study of the Buchan Combination Poorhouse in Wood (1985). He quotes (p. 89) figures from the Poorhouse minutes showing that in 1866 it cost 5s. 4d. per week to keep lunatic paupers in the poorhouse. This is roughly half the cost of a pauper lunatic in the Aberdeen Asylum.

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