



Book Review: Madhouse: A Tragic Tale of Megalomania and Modern Medicine

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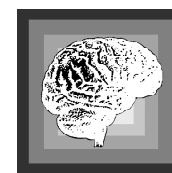
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Book Review

Andrew Scull. **Madhouse: A Tragic Tale of Megalomania and Modern Medicine.** *New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii + 360. £18.95. ISBN 0-300-10729-3.*

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Andrew Scull's latest book is a fascinating account of medical scandal and psychiatric practice in the first half of the twentieth century. It is like a jigsaw: each piece, superbly crafted and researched, produces a totally interlocking and absorbing narrative. The completed picture is a damning critique of the application of medico-biological theories of mental illness in twentieth-century psychiatry. It is, furthermore, a thriller, a detective story with a small number of whistleblower heroes and rather more zealous villains. Not only is the reader presented with the sensational details of what the application of science to psychiatry meant for patients' lives and bodies, Scull also provides a rigorous exposure of the complicity and connivance of prominent figures in the medical establishment to avert a public scandal. In all these respects his book informs the reader of a significant and shameful period in the recent history of psychiatric practice.

The context for Scull's discussion is the application of laboratory-based science to the treatment of mental disorder – an innovation which, its proponents believed, would free psychiatry from its late nineteenth-century pessimism and therapeutic impotence and bring it into the increasingly confident medical mainstream. One of the storm-troopers of this revolution was Henry Cotton who, between 1907 and 1930, was the head of Trenton State Hospital in New Jersey. It is Cotton's career – and the impact of his belief that hidden bodily infections were the cause of psychiatric disorders – that Scull explores in such meticulous and fascinating detail. It was a belief that promised much to anxious relatives, tax-paying citizens and those concerned with social problems. But its cost was also high, as Cotton and his assistants surgically removed 'the infected teeth and tonsils of dozens of his patients, not to mention their stomachs, gallbladders, colons, testicles and ovaries.' A tragic tale, indeed.

Cotton's fame and methods extended beyond the USA. He was fêted by the Medico-Psychological Association in the UK (which had received its

Royal charter by the time of his second visit in the late 1920s). Meanwhile, at Ruberry Hill and Hollymoor mental hospitals in Birmingham, Thomas Graves the superintendent also made the treatment of toxins a key feature of his work.

Yet, as Scull shows, Cotton's treatment and his increasingly dogmatic and mono-causal belief in focal sepsis came at the price of high death rates, brutalized bodies and patients who remained very ill. Not surprisingly, therefore, Cotton's regime came under critical investigation: research studies that questioned his alleged successes, a series of state investigations in New Jersey, and a commissioned scientific inquiry carried out by Phyllis Greenacre under the supervision of Adolf Meyer.

Despite all this attention and activity, however, a public scandal was averted. It is one of the strengths of Scull's analysis that, by the use of documentary and oral history testimony, he pieces together the way in which Cotton's powerful personality, prestige and the tenacity of his beliefs led to the suppression of much independent and critical evidence, including that of Dr Greenacre. A key player at this stage was Meyer himself, the Swiss neurologist (Cotton's mentor and director of Greenacre's research), who by that time occupied a position of considerable eminence in the American medical establishment. Meyer's prevarication, as much as Cotton's promotion of his own alleged successes, saved the latter's reputation, although from 1930 until his death three years later he was no longer Superintendent at Trenton but its Director of Research.

Scandal has become a *leitmotif* in histories of mental disorder and learning difficulty. The significance of Scull's book is that he delineates its dimensions with consummate skill and, as a good detective, helps his readers to understand why continuity – and not change – was an integral part of Cotton's legacy to psychiatric practice in the first half of the twentieth century.

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