

What became of Arthur Conan Doyle's father? The last years of Charles Altamont Doyle

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the fate of Arthur Conan Doyle's father, Charles Altamont Doyle, a Victorian illustrator, who spent his last years as an asylum inmate. Based on new archival research, it looks at the reasons for his institutionalisation and what befell him during his stay. It will consider Doyle's claim that he was wrongfully confined and also the suggestion that his family were responsible for having him committed. Finally, the paper will examine the nature of Doyle's condition and the creative work he produced whilst an asylum inmate.

KEYWORDS Charles Altamont Doyle, Arthur Conan Doyle, Victorian fairy Painting, alcoholism, Doyle Diary

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Altamont Doyle, the father of Arthur Conan Doyle, was a Victorian painter and illustrator. In the biographies of his famous son, Charles is usually portrayed as a gentle, unworldly man, whose fondness for the bottle led to him being shut away in an asylum.¹⁻³ His story has been taken as demonstrating the inability of Victorian society to tolerate its artistic misfits. The publication in 1978 of Michael Baker's *The Doyle Diary*,⁴ a facsimile of one of Doyle's asylum sketchbooks, did much to illuminate this period of his life and it also brought deserved attention to his creative work. However, Baker was not allowed access to the asylum records, so his account was, of necessity, incomplete.

Based on new archival research, this article aims to give a more detailed explanation of the reasons for Doyle's admission, firstly to an institution for inebriates and then to an asylum. It will more fully examine the nature of his condition, and what befell him during his stay. It will look at the work he produced as a detained patient, and consider not only his claim that he was wrongfully confined, but also the suggestion that his family were instrumental in having him committed.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles Altamont Doyle was born in London in 1832 into an Irish Catholic family. His father, John Doyle, was a prominent political cartoonist, while his mother, Marianna, was a sister of the artist and critic, Michael Conan. She died shortly after Charles was born. He had two sisters and four brothers, including Dicky Doyle,



Charles Doyle and the 6-year-old Arthur (Edinburgh, 1865)

FIGURE 1 Portrait of Charles and Arthur Doyle, Edinburgh, 1865.

who became a celebrated illustrator for Punch and a noted exponent of the Victorian fairy painting genre.⁵ It was a genre to which Charles was also to make a significant contribution.^{6,7} In his childhood, he recalled, the family often entertained 'the most distinguished and Literary and Artistic Men of London', including Thackeray, Dickens, Rossetti, Millais and Landseer.

In 1849, Charles was sent by his family to Edinburgh where he met Mary Foley, whom he later married in 1855. They had nine children, the third child being Arthur, who was born in 1859. Charles had moved to Edinburgh to take up an architectural post in the Scottish Office of Works. He designed the fountain at Holyrood Palace and one of the large windows in Glasgow Cathedral. He undertook book illustrations, sketched and painted pictures of fairies and the supernatural. However, Doyle's drinking developed into a serious problem. He was feckless, unreliable and missed time from work. The family lived precariously, were often in debt, and were compelled to make frequent moves around Edinburgh to progressively cheaper accommodation. Doyle was to remain at the Office of Works until 1876 when he was forced into early retirement because of his alcoholism. We know from the Census Records that by 1881 he was resident in a home for 'dipsomaniacs' at Blairerno.

THE ROAD TO BLAIRERNO HOUSE, KINCARDINSHIRE

We get a vivid picture of Doyle's alcoholism and the devastating effect it had on his family from a letter his wife wrote on 3 December 1892 to Dr James Rutherford at the Crichton Royal Asylum, where Charles was then a patient. She writes:

'My poor husband's condition was brought on by drink, he has had delirium tremens several times. Just thirty years ago - Decr. 62 - he had such a bad attack that for nearly a year he had to be on half pay and for months he cd [could] only crawl and was perfectly idiotic, could not tell his own name. Since then he has been from one fit of dipsomania to another. Using the most awful expedients, many times putting himself within reach of the law - to get drink - Every article of value he or I possessed carried off secretly, debts to large amount contracted to our trades people, bills given etc. - all for goods which never entered our doors, but were at once converted into money.'

Mary Doyle relates how her husband sold his drawings to pay for drink. She commented ruefully that: 'There is a public house in Edinburgh where I am told they have a most valuable collection of his sketches, given for drink'. She went on to describe the sheer desperation of her husband's attempts to procure alcohol:

'He would strip himself of all his underclothes, take the very bed linen, climb down the water spout at risk of his life, break open the children's money boxes. He even drank furniture varnish...'

Despite the horrors of her experiences with Doyle, Mary retained affection for him and in the letter commented on

his amiable disposition. She observed: 'To know him was to love him'.

It is clear that Charles' behaviour eventually became intolerable, and Mary recalls that friends urged her to have him removed from the home. A place was found for him in the north of Scotland at Blairerno House, an institution for the treatment of dipsomaniacs. It was situated in the parish of Glenbervie in Kincardineshire and lay on a minor road than ran north from Drumlithie. It advertised its services in the *Medical Directory* and the 1882 *Directory* contained the following description:

'INTEMPERANCE - Home for Gentlemen in Country House in the North of Scotland. Of very old standing. Home Comforts. Good Shooting, Trout-fishing and Cricket. HIGHEST REFERENCES. Apply MR D FORBES, BLAIRERNO HOUSE, DRUMLITHIE, FORDOUN, KINCARDINSHIRE.'

The 1881 Census reveals that the proprietor, Mr David Forbes, lived there with his wife, daughter and his two sisters. There was a staff of five female domestic servants and eighteen male residents. The residents came from respectable backgrounds, which included a 'landed proprietor', a tobacco manufacturer, two accountants, a retired army officer, a medical student and a music teacher. Charles Doyle was described as an 'architect and artist'.

According to his wife, Doyle remained at Blairerno 'for some years' but was always trying to escape in order to get drunk. Eventually, after one such drunken episode in 1885, he was transferred to Montrose Royal Asylum.

THE MONTROSE ROYAL ASYLUM, OR SUNNYSIDE

The Montrose Asylum was Scotland's oldest public asylum,⁸ having been established in 1781, though the institution that Doyle entered was built in 1858. During his stay there, the Asylum housed some 500 inmates, of whom about 80 were private and the remainder pauper patients. The physician superintendent was Dr James Howden, who took up his post in 1858 and remained for the next forty years. In his annual reports he stated his credo:

'we must not... lose sight of the great principle of non-restraint established by Pinel, Tuke, Hill, Conolly, and others, which have revolutionised the treatment of the insane, so that the modern asylum has the character and aims of a Hospital and a Sanatorium rather than of a Prison or a Poorhouse'.

Like all public asylums, Montrose was inspected every year by the Scottish Commissioners in Lunacy. Their

reports consistently praised the work of the asylum, commended the humanity of the staff as well as the degree of liberty allowed to patients. For example, in his 1887 report, Dr Arthur Mitchell wrote:

'The visits to this Asylum never fail to leave a most pleasant impression. Great ability, great liberality, and great kindness are seen everywhere, both in the treatment of patients and in the general management of the Institution. As usual, complete tranquillity and freedom from complaint, both among men and women, prevailed during this visit. The absence of irksome discipline is a prominent feature... The extent to which the patients are engaged in healthy, active, useful work, is very large, and their amusements are of a character which gives real pleasure.'

The amusements included theatrical entertainments, concerts, conjuring shows, magic lantern exhibitions, readings, dances, picnics, walks and even a visit from the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Doyle was to capture some of these activities in his sketches. In 1887, during Doyle's stay, the asylum magazine, *The Sunnyside Chronicle* was launched. This contained news about events in the institution as well as poems, articles and drawings by patients. As we will see, Doyle made many contributions to the magazine.

Doyle was admitted as a private patient to the Montrose Asylum on 26 May 1885. The Scottish Lunacy Laws stipulated that a patient committed to an asylum on an emergency basis was examined by two doctors. Each had to complete a medical certificate, which was then presented to the local sheriff, who made the final decision about committal. Speculation that it was Doyle's family who had him committed appears to be unfounded. As Mary Doyle recalled (in her letter to Dr Rutherford), Charles was certified and put in the Montrose asylum before she knew anything about it.

The first medical certificate was completed by Dr James Ironside, who wrote:

'He said he was to go away tonight, this was his last night, he had a message from God that he must go. Said he was getting messages from the unseen world... he had broken a window there and then tried to run away; then on being taken he struck everyone he could get near.'

The second medical certificate was completed by Dr James Duffus, who wrote: 'He commenced to swear when I questioned him and said we were a lot of devils'.

The admitting physician at the Montrose Asylum recorded that Doyle had 'managed to procure drink' at Blairerno and had become 'very excited'. The cause of

this attack was said to be alcohol and the duration one day. He was considered to be dangerous but not suicidal. The asylum doctor observed: 'Has been weak minded & nervous from his youth, and from his own account took refuge in alcoholics very early to give him courage &c.' He added: 'Is, or was a clever draughtsman, & is the brother of the Doyle connected with Punch in its early days'.

On admission to Sunnyside, he was noted to be calm but he was also described in the following way:

'very confused & bewildered; said he was over here before – which is not the case, I believe. He was unable to answer most questions, his memory for recent events especially, being very treacherous or altogether wanting. He could not tell me at once how many children he had, he said his brother was living but soon afterwards told me he was dead, & made many similar mistakes.'

However on physical examination he was judged to be in good health. Three days later he was described as 'still confused and dazed'. Doyle was also quoted as saying that he had 'made an attack on the servant girl, when he was the worse for drink'. A further three days later he was still muddled:

'Does not remember how he came here. Says he wandered from home further & further until he landed here. Does not remember in the afternoon whether he was out in the morning.'

By 18 June, however, he was considered to be less confused and judged to be cheerful and happy. What do the medical notes suggest about the nature of Doyle's condition? It appears that he was not simply just a heavy drinker. Straightforward toping did not usually result in admission to an asylum, even in Victorian times. Of course, complications of alcoholic excess, such as delirium tremens, could result in admission but the patient was quickly discharged after lucidity was regained. It is one of the abiding myths of the Victorian asylum that, once admitted, a patient never left.

It is clear that, in Doyle's case, the years of repeated drinking had resulted in brain damage with subsequent impairment of memory. His asylum physicians specifically describe problems with short-term memory, which suggest that Doyle suffered from what today we would call Korsakoff's psychosis. Interestingly, Dr Korsakoff was a contemporary of Doyle's, having first described his syndrome in 1887. Doyle's wife commented that, after an episode of what she termed 'delirium tremens', he was 'idiotic' for months afterwards and crucially that he was only able to 'crawl'. Perhaps what his wife called delirium tremens was really the acute onset of Korsakoff's, known as Wernicke's

Encephalopathy. Certainly this condition, which is a type of confusional state, is accompanied by ataxia.

The diagnosis of Doyle's condition is further complicated by his subsequent development of epileptic fits, which he does not appear to have experienced prior to his admission to Montrose. On 16 November, four months after his arrival at the asylum, the case notes record: 'This morning took an epileptic attack of general convulsions, the first fits we have known him have. He was very stupid for some hours afterwards, but did not know that he had had a fit'. On 6 January 1886, it was recorded that Doyle had 'two slight attacks of unconsciousness, apparently petit mal'. In April and June of that year, there were further recordings of fits. Indeed the case notes recorded that Doyle continued to experience epileptic fits for the remainder of his stay at Montrose. It has been suggested that Doyle was institutionalised because of his epilepsy, but it developed after admission and it was not a condition that often resulted in detention in an asylum.

Can Doyle's epilepsy be seen as yet another manifestation of his Korsakoff's syndrome? Probably not, as standard clinical descriptions make no mention of convulsions. Did Doyle have a co-existing condition, either epilepsy arising *de novo*, or secondary to some other underlying brain disorder? One immediately thinks of 'General Paralysis of the Insane' which afflicted many of the asylum population during this period, but Doyle showed no evidence of the typical neurological signs of the disease, at least, according to his physicians. Whatever the true nature of his disorder, his repeated fits were accompanied by a further deterioration in his memory and intellectual abilities. For example, the entry for 20 January 1890 reads: 'Has failed of late and has a very bad memory'. Further entries detailed his mental deterioration. On 5 January 1891, the asylum doctor noted that Doyle's memory for recent events was 'almost entirely gone'.

As well as charting Doyle's intellectual decline, the case notes give some idea as to his state of mind. An early entry captures what seems to have been a recurring pre-occupation of Doyle's: the notion that he was about to die. On 14 July 1885 it was recorded:

'During last week was very queer, complained at first of great languor, then of an overpowering presentiment that he was going to die, that he would die in 48 hours: he was not in the least depressed by the thought, but he took refuge in his prayer book, & had two long audiences with a priest, and prayed frequently... Mr Forbes [of Blairerno] informs me that he was often thus, and he has seen him lie down & die, but he always come to life again.'

In August 1886, he had another presentiment of imminent demise, and the entry for the 22nd of that month observes: 'This state of matters has lasted a week now during which he has done hardly anything but read his prayerbook'. Further entries also comment on Doyle spending hours reading volumes of devotion, for example, one describes him kneeling with his prayer book for half a day in the billiard room. On one occasion on the 14 June 1889, he became excited and said that he was in hell and the people round him were devils. Death, religion and the after-life were major concerns of Doyle's during his asylum days.

And, of course, he continued with his artistic activities. The case notes make several references to his creative pursuits. 'Is always drawing sketches or painting' is one such entry. However, towards the end of his time at Montrose, it was noted that his failing intellect was accompanied by a falling away of his artistic talent. The entry for 20 January 1890 notes: 'Is not sketching so much now and his work has deteriorated greatly'. It is intriguing that, even at this late stage, the asylum physician still found positive comments to make about Doyle: 'a most interesting man to talk to', he wrote. On 23 January 1891, Doyle was moved to the Royal Edinburgh Asylum. Such moves were not uncommon during this period and were inspired by the hope that a change of scene would benefit the patient. The transfer note from Montrose described Doyle as suffering from epilepsy, alcoholism and enfeebled memory. He was discharged from Montrose by the authority of the General Board of Lunacy and his condition was stated as 'Relieved'.

EDINBURGH AND DUMFRIES

The Royal Edinburgh Asylum also catered for private and pauper patients but it was a much bigger establishment than Montrose with twice the number of inmates. Doyle was a private patient and his rate of board was £42 per year. On admission it was noted that his memory was 'much impaired for recent events'. A diagnosis of 'epileptic insanity' was made. The next case entry was written on 17 February 1892 and mentions that Doyle was apparently hearing voices. It reads: 'He has numerous hallucinations of hearing, saying that his children are speaking to him.' It is difficult from this single observation to be sure in what way Doyle felt he was communicating with his children. Did he claim it was telepathy? Did he misidentify other people in the asylum as his children? Or was he actually hallucinating?

There is a letter from Mary Doyle to the Asylum superintendent, Dr Thomas Clouston, in which she replies to questions about her husband's epilepsy. She states that she had consulted her son, Arthur, who believed that his father's fits were occasional and that



FIGURE 2 Well met. Reproduced from: Baker M. *The Doyle Diary*. London; 1978.

one occurred six years previously. Mary Doyle felt that they 'only began lately'. Such comments would suggest that the family did not visit Charles on a regular basis. By this stage, Arthur lived in London and his mother lived in Kirkby Lonsdale, both some distance from the Morningside Asylum.

On 23 May 1892, Doyle was moved to the Crichton Royal in Dumfries. The transfer certificate was signed by Arthur Conan Doyle. He stated that the cause of his father's condition was 'dipsomania'. In answer to the question, 'Whether dangerous to others', he replied: 'Certainly not'. The Asylum records reveal that Charles was a private patient and that the rate of board was £40. This was paid by Conan Doyle.

The admitting doctor noted marked enfeeblement and described Doyle as 'facile' and 'childish'. His motor nervous system was found to be 'Healthy', although his reflexes were 'diminished'. A diagnosis of 'Dementia' was recorded.

The Dumfries notes described a familiar picture. Doyle's memory was poor, he continued to have fits, and his physical health deteriorated. He was, however, described as contented. An entry a few days before he died offers a poignant glimpse of Doyle. On 3 October 1893, it was recorded:

'Pleasant & easily pleased. Solemnly presented me with an empty paper which he assured me contained gold dust & was a reward for professional attendance. He said he had collected it in the sunlight on the bed.'

Seven days later he died 'in a fit during the night'.

DOYLE'S ASYLUM ART AND WRITING

The most substantial and widely-known body of Doyle's



FIGURE 3 Giant bird and female figure. Reproduced from: Baker M. *The Doyle Diary*. London; 1978.

asylum work is a 1889 sketchbook, which was subsequently published in 1978 as *The Doyle Diary*. In the opening page of the sketchbook, Doyle declared his primary intention:

'keep steadily in view that this Book is ascribed wholly to the produce of a MADMAN. Whereabouts would you say was the deficiency of intellect? Or depraved taste. If in the whole Book you can find a single Evidence of either, mark it and record it against me.'

Doyle's creative work was a means of demonstrating to himself and others that he was sane. He considered sending his work to the Lunacy Commissioners 'to show them the sort of Intellect they think it right to Imprison as Mad'. In another passage, he claimed he was 'a harmless gentleman' who had been the victim of 'utterly false conceptions of sanity or Insanity'. He explained:

'I believe I am branded as Mad solely from the narrow Scotch Misconception of Jokes – If Charles Lamb or Tom Hood had been caught, they would have been treated as I am, and the latter would probably have never written "the Song of a Shirt".'

The Doyle Diary represents work that Doyle produced between March and July of 1889 while resident in the Montrose Asylum. The case notes record that during this period he was subject to repeated fits and bouts of confusion. They also record that he was grieving the loss of a fellow patient, Mr Kinneer, who had recently died and whom Doyle mentions in his *Diary*. In the face of these difficulties, the high quality and originality of Doyle's work is all the more remarkable. The *Diary* is a fascinating and wide-ranging collection of sketches, watercolours, personal comments, whimsical musings, and verbal and visual jokes. In it, Doyle sketched scenes from asylum life, such as the picnics, the buildings (See figure 4), the staff

and fellow-patients. He painted fantastical pictures of giant birds (See figure 3), squirrels and polecats. He drew fairies, unicorns, sphinxes and exuberant vegetation. He recreated domestic idylls from his past and he depicted imaginary heraldic crests.

His Catholic beliefs were evident in his work. He repeatedly drew guardian angels who looked benignly down on him. In one of the most powerful images, entitled 'Well Met' (see figure 2), he portrayed himself meeting the figure of Death. He added the comment: 'I do believe that to be a Catholic there is Nothing so sweet in life as leaving it'. The case notes had described numerous episodes when Doyle claimed to have intimations of impending mortality, a prospect which he appeared to await with serenity. On another page in *The Diary*, there is a sequence in which he pictured himself 'bursting out' from an enclosed space which he calls 'quod', meaning prison. In the last part he escapes, but it is not clear whether Doyle is escaping from the asylum or from this earthly life, or, indeed, from both.

Doyle had ambitions for his work to be published but worried about its fate:

'I have now done a great many Vols. of ideas – but I am kept ignorant of what becomes of them. I asked them to be sent to Mrs. Doyle and submitted to Publishers, but as I have never had a single Book or Drawing acknowledged by her or other relatives I can only conclude that they see no profit in them.'

Did Doyle's family really ignore his correspondence or did he simply forget about their response as a result of his memory problem? Whatever the truth of the matter, Doyle evidently thought he was being shunned, which can only have added to his perception that he was 'wrongfully' confined. However, later in the sketchbook, Doyle has an affectionate drawing of his wife, captioned, 'Mary, My Ideal Home Ruler'. He sits beside her with a look of adoration. On another page he makes admiring references to his son's literary career.

Despite his talk of being 'imprisoned', Doyle made favourable comments about Montrose and its staff, some of whom he sketched. He mentioned that the superintendent, Dr Howden, had 'kindly' lent him a copy of a book by his brother, Dicky Doyle. He admired 'one of the attendant Girls in bluish white dress, and the brightest Scarlet stockings', adding, 'if only she knew how it became her'. He made a sensitive sketch of a young female cleaner, to whom he gave a copy. He praised an asylum picnic, exclaiming, 'Any nicer sandwiches and beer I never met', an observation which accompanied a line drawing of patients relaxing and evidently enjoying their outing.

As well as *The Diary*, other work from Doyle's asylum period has survived. There are drawings, articles and

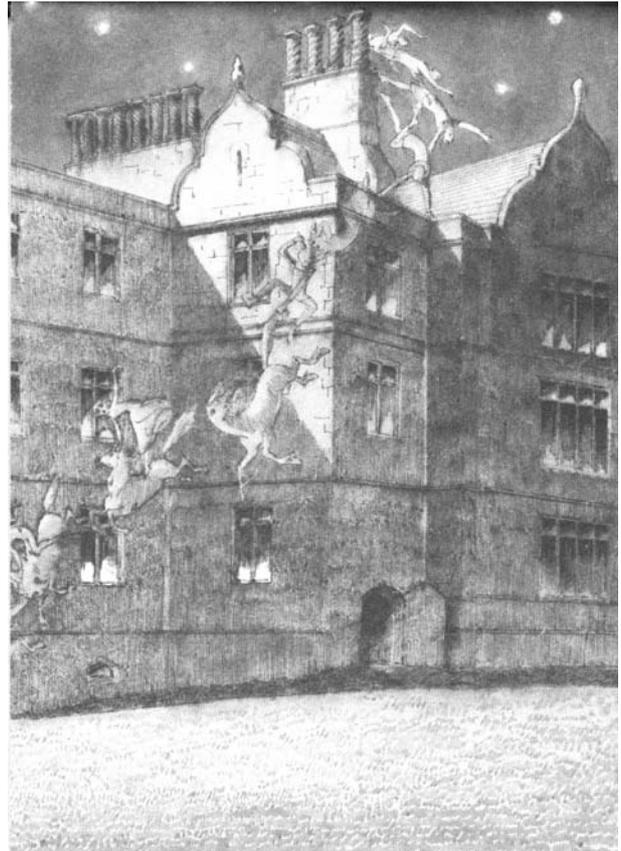


FIGURE 4 Montrose Asylum. Reproduced from: Baker M. *The Doyle Diary*. London; 1978.

poems, which appeared in *The Sunnyside Chronicle*. Of the writings, there are four poems: 'Man's Duplicity' on the untrustworthiness of men; 'Little Moments', a pious homily on the importance of small acts of kindness; 'A Mother's Love', a heart-felt, filial tribute; and 'The Flower', which comments on the cycle of life and death. There are four articles, 'Agitator or Patriot', which criticises the character of both Londoners and Americans, 'The Sanctuary', which describes the refuge at Holyrood in Edinburgh; 'The Shillelah', which calls for the dissolution of the union between Ireland and Britain; and 'A Treatise on a Single Stick' about the bachelor life. There are also three drawings, two celebrating festive occasions and adorning the front cover of *The Sunnyside Chronicle*, and one illustrating his article about the shillelah. All the drawings show a lightness of touch and a sense of humour.

There is an evocative watercolour, entitled *Self-Portrait, A Meditation*, which the Victorian and Albert Museum consider was painted between 1885 and 1893.⁹ In the picture Doyle portrays himself in pensive mode, sitting in a study around which creep various sinister and ethereal creatures. Behind him, a woman in white is levitating. In 1888 Doyle was commissioned by his son, Arthur, to illustrate *A Study in Scarlet*, the first full-length Sherlock Holmes novel. He provided six pen-and-ink drawings and commentators have been struck by the resemblance between Doyle's own appearance and his drawings of

Sherlock Holmes. The commission also demonstrates that Arthur continued to take an interest in his father. Doyle's work is scattered throughout the world in museums and private collections and some of this originated from his asylum days.

How is one to judge Charles Doyle's art? His son, Arthur, was in no doubt. He was 'a great and original artist... the greatest, in my opinion, of the family'. Even allowing for a son's partiality, Conan Doyle does go on to provide a convincing justification for his opinion:

'His brush was concerned not only with the fairies and delicate themes of the kind, but with wild and fearsome subjects, so that his work had a very peculiar style of its own, mitigated by great natural humour. He was more terrible than Blake and less morbid than Wiertz. His originality is best shown by the fact that one hardly knows with whom to compare him.'

Too often, critics have approached Charles Doyle's work with the knowledge that he ended his days in an asylum and have inspected his pictures for signs of morbid pathology. The subject matter of his art is often taken as evidence of mental disturbance, but the supernatural was a common theme in Victorian painting. His giant animals and birds have their antecedents in the work of Hieronymous Bosch. They also feature in the illustrated books of his contemporary, Lewis Carroll, as well as in the work of his successors, the Surrealists.

Misleading comparisons have been made with Richard Dadd,¹⁰ mainly because he, too, was an asylum inmate.

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But Dadd suffered from a psychotic illness, whereas Doyle had alcohol-induced memory problems and epilepsy. Further, Dadd produced obsessively-detailed paintings which took him years to complete and which were quite different from Doyle's work with its spontaneous use of line and sense of comic whimsy.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that Charles Doyle was originally admitted to Montrose Asylum because of a violent outburst occurring in the context of years of severe alcoholism. His family appear to have played no part in his detention which was a medico-legal process. He was kept institutionalised, not because he was too gifted for a strict and staid Victorian society, or because he was wrongfully confined at the behest of a conniving family, but because his severe memory problems and propensity to drink-fuelled aggression rendered him incapable of coping at home.

One could argue that the asylum was actually beneficial to Doyle. It offered him sanctuary: unable to survive in the outside world, his move to the institution granted him the time and space to pursue his art and writing. Despite his intellectual impairment, Doyle continued to produce work of a high quality, thus demonstrating that artistic ability can persist for some time alongside cognitive decline. Insofar as one can draw conclusions from official records, they suggest that the Montrose Asylum offered a caring and reasonably congenial environment. Doyle's own comments reveal that he found much to like about it, even though he longed to return home.

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