

THE HYDRA, CAPTAIN AJ BROCK AND THE TREATMENT OF SHELL-SHOCK IN EDINBURGH

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INTRODUCTION

In the first few weeks of July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, the problem that 'shell-shock' posed to the British Expeditionary Force became acute. According to the British official history, 'several thousand soldiers were rapidly passed out of the battle zone on account of nervous disorders and many of them were evacuated to England'.¹ A rapid expansion in medical services was necessary to deal with these patients, and it was at this time that the War Office took over Craiglockhart Hydropathic in Edinburgh for the treatment of shell-shocked officers.

The 'Hydro' had been built on Wester Craiglockhart Hill, in the south of the city, some 40 years previously – a huge Italianate villa offering lavish hydropathic facilities for the 'overtasked man of business and the jaded professional' to 'throw off and forget for a time their anxieties, and receive fresh vigour and new impulses to labour'.² Although some of these facilities continued to be used during the war by patients at Craiglockhart, it was probably the availability of adjoining land which attracted the War Office. After the war, the Hydropathic re-opened briefly, and the building is now part of Napier University.

Craiglockhart War Hospital has become famous due to its association with several remarkable individuals. The poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was sent to Craiglockhart in 1917 after refusing to serve further in a war he considered unjust, wrote about the hospital in his memoir *Sherston's Progress*. Sassoon was under the care of Captain WHR Rivers, an outstanding shell-shock doctor, anthropologist and psychologist. The story of their encounter was popularised in a trilogy of novels by Pat Barker, and the film *Regeneration*, in the 1990s. The hospital itself, however, has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Insofar as Craiglockhart has been studied, attention has focused mainly on Rivers and his use of psychoanalysis. It appears, however, that there were other, sociological aspects to therapy at Craiglockhart, centering especially around one of the other medical officers, Captain AJ Brock.

It is well known by literary scholars that one of Brock's patients, Wilfred Owen, was an editor of Craiglockhart's hospital magazine, and that some of his and Sassoon's poetry was first published in its pages. *The Hydra* was launched in April 1917, taking its name from the many-headed serpent slain by Hercules as one of his twelve labours: 'The name of the journal will indicate what we

wish its character to be: many headed – many sided.' In addition to providing 'light and amusing reading in verse and prose, and . . . articles of a more exclusively literary character', *The Hydra* served as 'a journal of events in the house and the recognised mouthpiece of the various societies and clubs'.³ Thus, it provides a rich source of information about life at Craiglockhart War Hospital.

The first series of the magazine began on 28 April 1917, and ran fortnightly until 29 September 1917 (12 issues). The average length of these issues was 20 pages, of which eight contained advertisements (for businesses such as jewellers, photographers, cigarette manufacturers, tailors and sports outfitters), with the rest dedicated to submitted poetry, prose and drawings, as well as news, hospital events and an editorial. The magazines were printed by Pillans & Wilson of Edinburgh. Cost was 6D per copy. Readers were asked to order their copy beforehand, and it was hoped that 'readers will . . . remain subscribers even when they leave us'.⁴ Readers were also asked 'to introduce *The Hydra* to their friends outside'.⁵ A new series, printed by the same company and also costing 6D per copy, began in November 1917 and ran monthly until July 1918 (nine issues). These were slightly longer (averaging 40 pages including 14 pages of adverts), and had extended news from the various societies in the hospital. There are a few photographs of the medical officers, hospital and members of the Officers' Club.

The only surviving run of the magazine of which I am aware is housed at the University of Oxford English Faculty Library (Wilfred Owen Collection); the National Library of Scotland has Xerox copies of this run. The collection is missing numbers 4–6 of the New Series (i.e. February to April 1918).

CAPTAIN BROCK AND ERGOTHERAPY

Of the four medical officers at Craiglockhart (Captain Rivers, Captain Brock, the American Major Ruggles and the Commanding Officer Major Bryce), it is Brock's name which appears by far the most frequently in *The Hydra* – both in relation to various societies in the Hospital, and as the contributor of several articles. His support is recognised in one of the later editorials: 'Captain Brock has always proved to be a staunch friend of the Field Club and *The Hydra*'.⁶ Before considering why this might be, and how *The Hydra* illustrates Brock's approach to the treatment of shell-shock, I will briefly describe the background to his ideas.

Arthur John Brock was born in 1879 in Overton, near Edinburgh, the son of a gentleman farmer and Florence Walker, a poet. Brock initially studied classics, graduating from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Edinburgh in 1894. He wanted to be an artist, but his father forbade it, so Brock returned to the University in 1896 to begin medical training, qualifying in 1901. Whilst Brock was a medical student, he came under the influence of Patrick Geddes, a celebrated local sociologist and scientist. One of Geddes's concerns was that mass migration from the country to the city during the nineteenth century had caused people to become dissociated from their environment, and the relationship 'place-work-folk' had broken down. To restore this relationship, he encouraged people to undertake a 'Regional Survey' of their environment, studying its geography, history and industries. Brock participated in these activities, and they significantly shaped his ideas on sociology, disease and treatment. He came to view neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion, as an extreme form of the social problems which Geddes had identified.⁵

While working at Woodburn Sanatorium for Consumptives, Brock recognised that 'chronic phthisis cases in sanatoria suffer much from minor neurasthenic symptoms'. His view was that 'the essence of neurasthenia is a weakness of the will', and that 'the will, like any other faculty, becomes weak through not being used'. The answer, therefore, was work, or 'ergotherapy': 'work is what keeps people alive – work, effort, struggle, is the fundamental law and purpose of life'.⁶ In 1915, Brock joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was transferred to Craiglockhart in 1917. Brock viewed shell-shock as simply the soldier's equivalent of neurasthenia, and Geddesian ideas therefore shaped his approach to treatment at Craiglockhart. *The Hydra* illustrates this in a number of ways.

Ergotherapy in *The Hydra*

The 'none too lightsome task' of producing a hospital magazine was, in itself, a form of work therapy.⁷ All contributions were to be original, and appeals to fellow patients were constantly made by the editors: 'We notice many officers standing about doing nothing. Next time you have nothing to do, go and write something. It will probably be printed, and there is a certain amount of satisfaction in seeing one's efforts in print'.⁸

Brock wrote of 'ergophobia', a neurasthenic symptom he thought endemic in pre-war society: 'there is a special need to emphasise the moral aspect of the fault. Many of us are, undoubtedly, becoming reluctant to face life'.⁹ He pointed to the popularity of 'the melodrama of the picture house,' which appeared to offer 'brighter prospects by far than the real world'.¹⁰ Brock thought that shell-shock patients were particularly prone to relying on such 'moral dopes'; 'Circumstances had treated them so badly that they were disinclined to have to do with circumstances

again – except in so far, perhaps, as these gratified their senses'.¹¹

The Hydra encouraged Craiglockhart patients to engage in life. Such encouragement was not provided at all shell-shock hospitals. The first patients brought back to Britain had been treated with the Weir Mitchell cure of isolation, rest, massage, and a milk diet, and conventionally-minded medical officers encouraged patients to 'put it out of your mind, old boy'. 'The advice which has usually been given to my patients in other hospitals,' wrote Rivers, 'is that they should endeavour to banish all thoughts of the war from their minds . . . and lead their thoughts to other topics, beautiful scenery and other pleasant aspects of experience'.¹² Patients were not allowed to discuss their experiences among themselves or with visitors, an approach which helped to maintain the credibility of home front propaganda.¹³ Rivers, however, recognised that repression of traumatic memories resulted in perpetuating and fixing neuroses. He found that when his patients allowed their minds to dwell on their experiences during the day, they were no longer disturbed at night by terrifying dreams.¹⁴ This advice appealed to Brock's philosophy of facing up to life. 'In the powerful war-poems of Wilfred Owen,' he wrote, 'we read the heroic testimony of one who . . . in the most literal sense "faced the phantoms of the mind"'.¹⁵

Whilst the poems of Owen and Sassoon may be the most well-known contributions to *The Hydra*, the general tone of the magazine is 'elaborately cheerful'.¹⁶ In one of the editorials, for example, Owen chirps: 'Many of us who came to the hydro slightly ill are now getting dangerously well. In this excellent concentration camp we are fast recovering from the shock of coming to England'.¹⁷ The magazine gives an upbeat account of happenings in the hospital, and is full of articles and poems on the joys of returning to the 'English' countryside. This is consistent with Rivers's philosophy: 'it is just as harmful to dwell persistently upon painful memories . . . as it is to banish them wholly from the mind. Just as we prescribe moderation in eating, drinking, and smoking, so is moderation necessary in talking, reading, and thinking about war experience'.¹⁸

THE HOSPITAL AS A THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITY

Therapeutic benefits were claimed by *The Hydra* for many of the activities on offer at Craiglockhart; for example badminton: 'Let the shuttle continue to weave health and strength into our tired muscles. We hope to note renewed enthusiasm in our next issue'.¹⁹ The 'ancient and honourable' game of golf receives glowing recommendations: 'How much more beneficial it is for patients to play even once round the course daily . . . than to be perpetually immured in a picture house, or to parade Princes Street for the gratification of their own vanity. Perhaps interest might be stimulated in this great health-giving national game, and the result would be

advantageous to the patients, morally and physically.’²⁰ Interestingly, however, use of the Hydro’s hot baths is not encouraged: ‘People . . . are finding out what a devitalising experience a Turkish bath can prove.’²¹ In his 1918 article ‘Re-education of the Adult’, Brock writes about the tendency of shell-shock patients to indulge in over-stimulation of the hot sense through hot drinks and hot-water bottles. This, like drugs, alcohol, spicy food and other forms of gratification of the senses, was to be discouraged.²²

The activities at Craiglockhart created a community to which everyone should contribute:

considerable progress has been made in the garden . . . due largely to the interest taken in the [Poultry Keepers and Gardening] Association by the CO and Captain Brock. Efforts are being made to secure a further piece of ground, so that, if the war continues, we may yet see the Association the proud possessor of at least ‘three acres and a cow’. Meanwhile, lest inaction should damp the enthusiasm of the members who yearn to get back to the land, the Association proposes to undertake the care and upkeep of the tennis lawn and bowling greens.²³

This industry and self-sufficiency may have been a contribution to the ‘war effort’. But more than this, creating a therapeutic, cohesive society at the hospital was an important part of therapy for Brock: ‘Every master of medicine, from Hippocrates onwards, has emphasised the fact . . . the practitioner must manipulate the surroundings as well as the patient . . . for example, the social surroundings.’²⁴ He argued that ‘the pre-war public mind was fragmented, and the fragments did not cohere’. To Freud, he wrote, ‘the most characteristic feature of Neurasthenia . . . was just this lack of solidarity, this segregation of parts’.²⁵ Shell-shock patients had become ‘like the fragments of their minds, isolated units, unrelated in space and time’.²⁶ *The Hydra* helped provide integration and cohesion to the hospital community:

On the golf links, the tennis lawn, the billiard table, the bowling green, the debating floor, and the concert platform, we seek the return of interest, health, and vigour. The magazine has a two-fold function. On the one hand it provides a means for the expression of two further activities – the wielding of pen and of pencil; while, on the other, it acts as the link between each and every activity.²⁷

RE-EDUCATION IN *THE HYDRA*

Brock claimed that ‘pre-war education undoubtedly did much to predispose towards neurasthenia’.²⁸ He also remarked about the ‘childishness’ of patients: ‘the ordinary progress of the individual’s life appeared to halt; he ceased to grow up . . . or he might partly fall back into childhood’.²⁹ Re-education therefore became part of the therapeutic regime. Brock’s favoured method of

education was the Geddesian Regional Survey, ‘which will,’ he wrote, ‘have to be increasingly apprehended and practised by every intelligent individual in the future, if civilisation is not to fail us. The method of Regional Survey, in fact, is bound in time to be accepted as the basis of popular education.’³⁰

Brock set his patients on an individual programme of study that must have made him seem, as Dominic Hibberd has suggested, ‘more like a tutor than a doctor’. More generally, he used *The Hydra*, and the Field Club, of which he was president, to encourage patients to undertake their own Regional Survey. In three articles entitled ‘Evolving Edinburgh’, Brock writes about the history, geology and industries of the city, concluding that ‘Edinburgh is not to be looked on as a mere place to “kill time” in; it is distinctly available as an integral part of the Craiglockhart “cure”’.³¹

The Field Club was founded in July 1917, with Owen as a founder member. *The Hydra* reports:

an enthusiastic preliminary meeting, at which Mr Chase gave a paper on ‘Mosses of the Craiglockhart District’, illustrated by specimens, diagrams and microscope slides. At the close of the meeting it was resolved that a field club should definitely be constituted, that there should be a meeting every Monday evening for a paper and discussion, and that, if possible, excursions should be arranged. The following office-bearers were elected: President, Capt. Brock; Secretary, Mr Chase. Recruits are wanted. Don’t wait to be pushed. ‘The wind’s on the heath.’³²

Brock explains in later issues of *The Hydra*:

The Field Club in a sense aims at co-ordinating all the other scientific groups. Its immediate object is a regional survey, i.e. a survey of the Craiglockhart region, from all the different aspects (geological, botanical, economic, etc.) which will, at the same time, show the absolute interdependence between these aspects.³³ . . . The most important industry in the country around Craiglockhart is naturally agriculture, and . . . a visit has been planned to Gray’s Mill Farm, Slateford. We expect to see there the ‘back to the land’ movement in its most concrete form.³⁴

In addition to weekly papers and excursions, the Field Club organised special classes for patients at the Edinburgh and East of Scotland College of Agriculture and the Edinburgh School of Art:

Our contact with the city and its region is thus seen to be growing daily more close. The latest development is the arrangement made by Lord Guthrie [President of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society], whereby officers are to have the use of the reading-

room and consulting library of the Royal Geographical Society and the Philosophical Institution, and also access to the lectures of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.³⁵

Little wonder that Owen should regard Craiglockhart as 'a free and easy Oxford'.³⁶

The Hydra claimed that 'the Officer's Club [the umbrella body for all the hospital societies] is an institution so varied in its scope and in the extent of its intellectual encouragement that one may justly compare it with the city of Athens under Pericles'.³⁷ This, if not actually written by Brock, would have been music to his ears: 'City life at its best, as, say, at Periclean Athens or in the Middle Ages before their decline,' he wrote, 'has maintained the local or "spatial" solidarity of the country life.'³⁸ Owen wrote that at Craiglockhart he was 'full of activities' and enjoying a 'Greek feeling of energy and elemental life'.³⁹ The key, as always, was work:

Our activities, in order to be healthy . . . must be constructive and productive, not merely critical and academic. It is when our heads are high in the clouds of unpracticality, our feet clean off the earth, that the Hercules of War will overcome us. *Labor omnia vincit*.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

For what future did Craiglockhart rehabilitate patients? Although Brock was professionally obliged, as a commissioned army psychiatrist, to return officers to active service, he found this 'one of the very hardest things that a doctor had to do'.⁴¹ To some extent, Brock seems to have been preparing his patients for life after the war. His methods might even be viewed as an early form of occupational therapy. The Field Club, for example, aimed to be:

the first step towards the future employment of officers in work for which they possess special aptitude. We have had already in this war too much of the 'square peg in a round hole' policy, and there is no reason why we, at Craiglockhart, should not be preparing for a more enlightened policy.⁴²

For Brock, neurasthenia was a condition with a social cause. He wrote that, in the post-war years, 'the world's opportunity has at length come . . . at no time was mankind in a better position to become master of its fate'.⁴³ Craiglockhart was Brock's model of how future society should be. 'Après la guerre we expect to see all our Craiglockhart farming enthusiasts at least Heads of Department for the resettlement and reorganisation of the countryside!'⁴⁴

In summary, this study revealed a little-studied aspect of the treatment of shell-shock – that of a therapeutic community. The method employed, i.e. analysis of a

hospital magazine, may seem an unusual way of investigating therapeutics. It has, however, proved valuable, revealing aspects of sociological thinking which would be hard to elucidate from any other source. It has also shown that a fuller investigation is warranted of Craiglockhart War Hospital, and this fascinating episode in Edinburgh's medical history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Steven Sturdy of the Science Studies Unit, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Edinburgh, for supervising this project.

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