

# Before the welfare state: Bastian's Civil List pension

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**ABSTRACT** Bastian, an eminent, if controversial, naturalist, pioneer neurologist, and for 30 years, professor at University College, London, ended with a certain income of only £75 in his last year. Sir James Crichton-Browne initiated the grant of a Civil List pension. Prime Minister H Asquith, after consulting the London Royal Society, advised King George V to disburse a pension of £150.

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Charlton Bastian (1837–1915)<sup>1</sup> started as a brilliant naturalist and physician, but ended in penury. He had qualified from University College Hospital, London, in 1863, and quickly became lecturer in pathology and assistant physician at St Mary's Hospital. He moved back to University College Hospital in 1867 as honorary physician and professor, first of pathology, and later of medicine. The next year, 1868, aged 31, he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society for his work on the round worms of his native Cornwall, and also joined the honorary consultant staff of the almost new National Hospital for Epilepsy and Paralysis in Queen Square. There he continued his seminal role as neurologist, by invitation, until 1912 when he was aged 75. He had resigned from his posts at University College Hospital in 1897 in order to have more time for his experiments in bacteriology which he conducted behind a screen in his consulting room in Manchester Square in the West End of London. He maintained his belief that he had proved the continuing creation of microorganisms from non-living matter, termed 'abiogenesis' by the disapproving TH Huxley. Bastian's last paper on this topic appeared in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine in the year of his death.<sup>2</sup>

After his retiral from honorary physicianship at University College Hospital, Bastian's practice dwindled; he had been unfortunate in investments and this was worsened by the outbreak of war in 1914. He was obliged to move with his wife and daughter from the West End to a small mortgaged property in the Chilterns where his plan to make ends meet by taking in patients failed. There had been no pension from the University College London professorships, whatever financial perks there might have been during his tenure of 30 years.<sup>3</sup>

Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938)<sup>4</sup> took action. They had overlapped in many ways. In 1886, Bastian and Crichton-Browne had been among the founders of the

Neurological Society of London. Crichton-Browne, whose father had been Commissioner in Lunacy in Scotland, and also the first superintendent of the new Crichton Royal Institution in Dumfries, had himself quickly become superintendent of lunatic asylums in England, culminating in his stint in Wakefield at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum (1866–1876). There Crichton-Browne more or less started the study of organic psychiatry in England by postmortem neuropathology and by experimental neurology, furthering the careers of David Ferrier, Hughlings Jackson etc.

His new *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Reports* was the precursor of the journal *Brain* which he co-founded in 1878, and which would publish much of Bastian's original and controversial neurology at length. With Crichton-Browne as the Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy from 1875 onwards, Bastian had been consultant on the sanity, or otherwise, of convicts in capital cases.

On 9 February 1915, Crichton-Browne engaged the geologist Sir James Geikie (former President, Royal Society of London), Sir Thomas Barlow (the President of the Royal College of Physicians of London) and Sir William Ramsay, a distinguished chemist, to join him in a letter to Asquith, the prime minister, praying for the grant of a Civil List pension to Bastian.<sup>3</sup>

Bastian was asked to provide details of his finances which he did in his very legible handwriting: in 1898, on resigning from UCH, his professional income had been £1,623 [equivalent to about £100,000 now], it had dropped to £725 in 1907, and to £327 in 1914; of this £220 had been for the care of two rich Chancery patients who had since died, leaving a definite 1915 income of £75, of which £16 was for the trusteeship of the estate of the philosopher Herbert Spencer.

The Royal Society was then consulted by the Prime Minister, and on 17 March 1915 its Scientific Relief Committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Clifford Allbutt, gave 'strong support in view of Bastian's valuable and distinguished contribution to biological science, especially in the field of neurology'. There was nothing about Bastian's supposed experimental proof of 'abiogenesis' which had had great renown in the lay press but which the Royal Society had refused to publish in its *Transactions* although he was a Fellow.

Despite the ongoing battles on the Western front (Neuve Chapelle) and the incipient Gallipoli campaign, Asquith submitted an application for a pension of £150 [about £10,000 now] from the Civil List to King George V on 15 March. The King initialled his approval of the short-list in which Bastian's £150 was followed by £100 for the poet Walter de la Mare.

The Treasury duly disbursed by the end of March, and Bastian died eight months later at the end of 1915; a fraction of the pension was continued to his widow.<sup>5</sup>

Sir Clifford Allbutt (1836–1925), remembered as the inventor of the short clinical thermometer, was not just the vice-presidential chairman but was also the only medical member of the Royal Society Relief Committee advising the prime minister. As a young physician Allbutt had worked at Leeds and travelled to nearby Wakefield to experiment on Crichton-Browne's patients in the asylum. The study was published in 1872 as 'The electrical treatment of the insane' in Volume 2 of the *West Riding*

*Lunatic Asylum Reports*, a remote precursor of the electroconvulsive therapy of the 1930s and since.

Crichton-Browne was a man of parts, and his initiation of Bastian's relief was in character. After his retirement aged 35 from the Wakefield asylum he contributed nothing further to the neurosciences apart from a few review articles in the early volumes of *Brain*. As one of the three Lord Chancellor's Visitors in Lunacy he peregrinated all over England and Wales, inspecting private and public institutions for 47 years from 1875 to 1922, when he retired aged 82. In psychiatry he agitated for early treatment in general and for the recognition of mental problems in childhood. He disapproved of hypnotherapy and of psychoanalysis. His own father, WAF Browne, had been the first superintendent of the Crichton Royal Institution, and he boosted his 'moral' treatment, that is, benevolent asylum care and diversions, and moderate use of sedative drugs.

More widely, he spoke and wrote about the malnutrition of the schoolchildren of his time, and the hazards of educational forcing, and about better treatment for tuberculosis, and other good causes.

In literature he strove to correct misapprehensions about Burns and Carlyle. He published five deservedly popular books of mainly medical anecdote in his eighties and nineties, the last one in 1938 a year before his death in Dumfries at the age of 97. Unlike Bastian, he left an estate of over £100,000.<sup>6</sup>

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