

# The Two Oldest Mental Asylums in Ireland: Jonathan Swift's Philanthropy and William Hallaran's Foresightedness

Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad

Perusers of my columns would know that my medical career commenced in the Republic of Ireland. I spent some time over there before relocating to Edinburgh. I have maintained my links with that lovely country and shall never be able to discharge my debt of gratitude to the country for the role it played in my professional as well as personal development.

It was in the Irish Republic that I had my first exposure to psychiatry. And I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been permitted to research on the development of psychiatry in Ireland, which was in many ways, quite different to the manner in which psychiatry developed in the United Kingdom and other European countries.

## St. Patrick's Hospital, Dublin

St. Patrick's Hospital is the oldest psychiatric hospital in the country. It was founded in the year 1746. That would, according to the records available, make it the third oldest psychiatric hospital in Europe, and probably the sixth oldest psychiatric hospital in the world. From the records that I have been able to pursue, the oldest psychiatric hospital in the world came about in Baghdad, Iraq in 705 AD, and the second oldest psychiatric hospital came into existence in 800 AD in Cairo followed by the mental hospital in Damascus, Syria which started functioning in 1270 AD.<sup>[1]</sup>

The oldest psychiatric hospital in Europe, according to the records I have been able to peruse, is the



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Bethlem Royal Hospital in London, which started in 1329, and the second oldest was the Hospital of the Innocents (Hospital de la Inocents) in Valencia, Spain which started functioning in 1410.<sup>[1]</sup>

When I delved into the history of St. Patrick's Hospital, I was amazed to discover the name of the person who had bequeathed money for the hospital. I was very familiar with the name but had no idea at all that, apart from being an author of one of the all-time great classics, he was also a very highly placed clergyman and a very generous philanthropist.<sup>[2]</sup>

All of us would be able to recognize Jonathan Swift as the author who penned the classic *Gulliver's Travels*, a book that has continued to enthral children and adults alike for over 250 years. Little did I realize that Swift was the Dean of the St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and one of the most respected figures in the clergymen of his era. He had penned *Gulliver's Travels* as a satire little realising the immortality his work was soon going to acquire. Swift had also functioned as one of the governors of the Bethlem Hospital and was well acquainted with the special needs of the mentally ill. He died in 1745 leaving behind the bulk of his estate conservatively valued at the time as 12,000 pounds sterling for "an Hospital large enough for the Reception of as many Ideots and Lunaticks as the annual income of my Lands and Effects should be sufficient to maintain." He wrote the famous words:

*"He gave the Little Wealth He had  
To build a House for Fools and Mad  
And shew'd by one satyric Touch  
No Nation wanted it so much"*<sup>[2]</sup>

In the will, he directed that the hospital be christened St. Patrick's Hospital. The hospital had fifty patients in 1757. Swift had been very interested in mental illness. Ironically, in his old age he developed dementia, which, according to John Boyle, the Earl of Orrery,

left him "a quiet speechless idiot."<sup>[2]</sup>

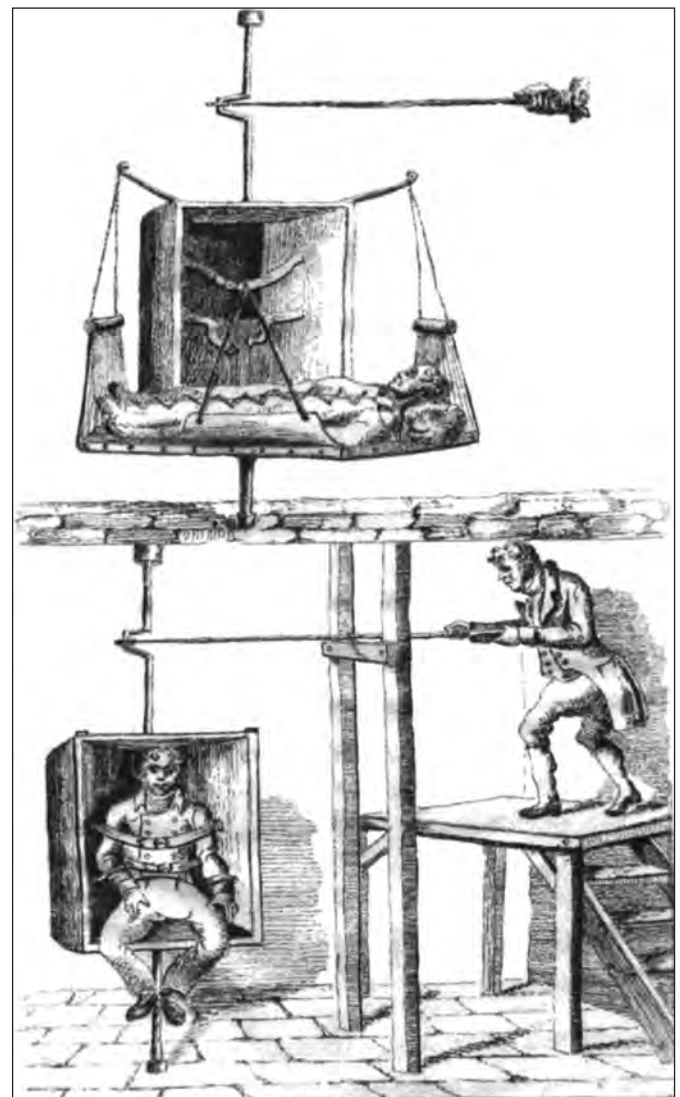
### Cork Mental Asylum

The second Irish asylum was established in Cork by the Act of 27 & 28 Geo. III, C, 39, as an offshoot from the House of industry land opened in 1789 with William Saunders Hallaran (1765-1825) as its first physician. He held this post to the end of his life and under his care it grew to hold 163 patients in 1810, the year the first edition of his pioneering book was published.<sup>[3]</sup> In 1817, he reported to the Select Committee of the House of Commons "appointed to inquire into the expediency of making further Provision for...the Lunatic Poor, in Ireland" that the hospital had been further enlarged and was 'capable of receiving two hundred and fifty person... under the different modifications of mental alienation.'<sup>[4]</sup> A large field had been acquired "adjoining the asylum... for the purpose of enlarging the means of general recreation, and also of giving ample opportunity to the convalescents of moderate labour, in the exercise of horticulture, the benefits of which have been found to contribute, in a most striking manner, to their immediate tranquillity, as well as to the ultimate object of recovery." Indeed, it was Hallaran's concern to provide most up-to-date treatment for his patients and especially minimum restriction with maximum occupation. This made Thomas Spring Rice (1790-1866), the Irish Lunach reformer and later Chancellor of the Exchequer, single out the Cork Asylum as a model establishment: 'The Establishment at Cork' he deposed to the same Parliamentary Committee "struck me as being the best managed, not only that I had ever seen, but ever considered or heard of realizing all the advantages of Took's Asylum at York" - referring of course to the York Retreat conducted by the Tuke family.<sup>[5]</sup>

Throughout his book- incidentally the first by an Irish physician on insanity-Hallaran laid stress "On the cure of Insanity," as indeed its title shows especially by suitable occupation for 'the convalescent' combining "Corporeal action, with the regular employment of the mind." This was no mere counsel of perfection but he actually put it into practice as the first extract shows, in which occurs also the first account of the benefit a patient derived from being allowed to paint. His figure of "not... more than fifty out of six hundred and forty-two" patients not fully employed would do credit to any modern mental hospital. For potentially dangerous patients he invented a contraption allowing limited movement of the arms and legs to enable them to exercise in the open air instead of prolonging their close confinement as was customary and which had re-

sulted in many developing "a vicious disposition... as if from a consciousness... of injurious treatment, and the justice of resenting it." Hallaran was progressive – even modern- when he recommended discharging convalescent patients considered "incapable of further amendment" in the asylum: "These I have invariably dismissed the house as soon as I could fairly calculate upon their good conduct with respect to the public," and he added that he had "often been very agreeably surprised" at the result.<sup>[5]</sup>

He used the modern physical treatments, especially the swing so strongly recommended by Cox, by which he had "never been at a loss for a direct mode of establishing a supreme authority over the most turbulent and unruly; the asylum was 'remarkable for its



**Figure 1. Circulation swing used for treating manic patients in Cork** (Source: Doctoral thesis, Ashoka Jahnvi Prasad, University of Cambridge, 2007)

tranquillity, law and order' and was particularly useful in those presumably severely depressed patients on whom other measures had no influence even to maintain the common energies of life." By his modification of Cox's machine, four patients could be swung simultaneously in the horizontal or erect position at more than 100 rotations a minute. Nausea, vomiting, unconsciousness and finally deep sleep lasting eight to ten hours followed from which they awoke with their mad ideas "totally altered."<sup>[5]</sup>

Hallaran distinguished mental (hallucinations) and physical (corporeal delirium) forms of insanity. The latter, he contended, "could be induced by religious mania, the terror of conflict, excessive religious devotion and the abuse of spirituous alcohol." He strongly emphasized the benefits of emotional support and kindness, minimising restraint and cultivating rational thinking.<sup>[5]</sup>

Hallaran also gave much thought to psychological aspects and as the second extract (from the second edition of his book) shows distinguished 'mental insanity' from insanity due "to organic disease ... affecting the brain" either primarily or secondarily, "the 'Mania corporea' of Cullen." This fundamental distinction led to many later advances made by the discovery and definition of organic conditions presenting as psychiatric syndromes of which the classical example was general paralysis of the insane; while, from recognition of 'mental insanity' and its study all psychotherapeutic endeavours grew. Interest in 'mental' or 'moral' treatment also led Hallaran to stress the importance of the first interview with a patient. His advice on how the psychiatrist should conduct himself forms the third extract from the works of this enlightened physician who first recognised the danger of, and combated 'institutionalisation' – the 'institutional neurosis' of today to which Reid (1816) pointed a warning finger and which later many deplored and which even in this seventh decade of the twentieth century is still a very real evil.<sup>[6]</sup>

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