

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

A French view of a Welsh revival*

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In 1904 and 1905 a religious revival took place in Wales and the fervour and tumult caused by it produced wide-spread excitement and interest. It was reported widely in the United Kingdom, the United States and in continental Europe, most notably in France.

The medical press was not immune to the revival and a leader headed 'Revivalism in Wales' appeared in the *Lancet* of 26 November 1904 which read "It is not our custom to touch in these pages upon religious questions, but no consideration of this kind need we feel debar us from commenting upon the curious psychological phenomena at present being exhibited in South Wales in connection with the religious upheaval which is in progress there".

The article proceeded to describe "the scenes of disorder which have marked the peregrinations of the Chief Missioner. . . we read of meetings prolonged well into the early hours of the morning; of dramatic conversions accompanied by scenes of wild excitement . . . of women taken out in a state of collapse; of strong men sobbing and bearing testimony in quivering broken accents, but incidentally neglecting to follow their usual occupations; of, in short, a debauch of emotionalism which may well raise doubts as to the stability of the Celtic temperament".

The piece went on to ask what could be said of the chief instigator of this "tumult". They quote from a *Western Mail* interview which described the instigator as follows: "his restlessness is marvellous, he is walking about all day with a springiness of a man treading on wires, his arms swaying unceasingly. During a period of 48 hours we were told he had only one hour's sleep and that he eats little. There has been a suggestion of his having been animated with magnetism and he is quoted as saying that no watch will keep time with him. It is recorded that at one meeting he fell prostrate and remained on his face on the floor for some time seeming to be in agony, while on another occasion he was observed to be weeping like a child". He is reported to have said, "when I go out to the garden I see the Devil grinning at me, but I am not afraid of him, I go into the house and when I go

*Derived from the Chairman's address to the Welsh Psychiatric Society, April 1991.



"Mrs Martha Powell of Newbridge has recently become the proud owner of this very special picture . . . of Evan Roberts, a well-known revivalist in the early part of this century, who was to have a profound effect on her life. Her cousin found the picture in a cowshed in Pembrokeshire and sent it to her. 'My father, a miner was converted to religion under Evan Roberts,' said Mrs Powell. Mrs Powell said Evan Roberts had 'a tremendous effect' on everyone". *South Wales Argus*, 26 July 1983. (Research, Librarian, *South Wales Argus*.)

out again to the back I see Jesus Christ smiling at me".

The leader concludes: "This is a picture which can hardly fail to excite concern on the part of the Preacher's friends, and if these include any Medical Practitioners it would be true kindness on their part to point out to him, the peril which menaces his intellectual equilibrium".

The subject of these comments was Evan Roberts, a young man in his mid-twenties of Lougher, (a small Village in West Glamorgan) who had formerly worked as a miner and blacksmith and who had lately been preparing for the Ministry at a Denominational preparatory school. He was regarded as a sensitive and sincere man who was quickly caught up in the emotional turbulence of the revival and for many

months had led a life of intense and prolonged emotional excitement before he abruptly left his mission together with the local, national, and international celebrity that had gone with it. He was soon to retire to the life of a near recluse – living in England until 1925 and then moving back to South Wales where he died in 1951.

At this time Wales was being excited by another charismatic figure, David Lloyd George. There were similarities between the aspirations of the Liberals and the Welsh nonconformists and campaign meetings were turning into revivalist celebrations and Lloyd George seemed powerless to stop this. Although now in the last few weeks of his career as an Evangelist, such was Evan Roberts' magnetism that he was requested by Lloyd George not to attend a political meeting at Caernarfon and they struck a bargain in which Roberts stayed away from the meeting while Lloyd George on his part agreed to be photographed with him.

Around the turn of the century people were moving away from Victorian certainties towards new forms of religious experience. There was an increasing interest in mysticism, in psychical research and movements like theosophy flourished. These attitudes led towards a religion that was anti-dogmatic and anti-clerical in nature.

Anti-clericalism had also been a powerful political and emotional issue for some years in France. In 1905 the French Church and State had separated. It was possibly while in the throes of this religious crisis and upheaval that the French Public Health Department began to investigate the effects of religious excitement on the mental health of those with nervous instability. As part of this investigation the Ministry of the Interior invited a French psychiatrist, Dr J. Rogues de Fursac, to visit Wales to study at first hand the religious revival and its effects on mental health and the behaviour of the population at large. He undertook his study in the Spring of 1906. On his return he produced a long report entitled 'The Religious Revival in Wales, a Contemporary Mystical Movement'.

de Fursac's work on revival was one of several publications. The first in 1899 was on the physical stigmata of general paralysis. He published a series of lectures on morbid psychology entitled 'L'avarice' (1911), and finally in 1923 he produced a *Manual of Psychiatry*. He was a highly regarded figure in French psychiatry of his time. He was known as a most cultivated man with a considerable interest in social problems.

His long account is a vivid chronological description of his stay in South Wales. It is an account written by an acute and sympathetic observer who quickly developed a real understanding of the people and social conditions in South Wales. He had a special interest in alcoholism and observed while in

Cardiff that "these people drink to drink. It is naked alcoholism, not hidden as in France by the gaiety of the cafe terraces and the pleasure of spending 20 minutes with a friend". While in Cardiff he made the acquaintance of a Salvation Army Captain and observed his work with alcoholics which impressed him. He writes, "a cured alcoholic and one that has been cured for 20 years that is something to move the psychiatrist. Unfortunately, if someone came to me and asked if I knew ten cured alcoholics I would have as much difficulty in thinking of ten as Abraham did when the Lord asked him to find ten good things in Sodom". He asks himself what might be the secret of these Salvationists who managed to contradict the terrible proverb "Who drank, will drink". He concluded that much of the answer lay in the supportive social groupings they form and not in any of the conversions so much publicised at the time in the wake of the Revival. He felt these conversions depended very much on emotional pressures on people who had received an intense religious education in early life and also felt that environment and race might be additional minor predisposing factors. He dismissed the influence of external religious and super-natural factors saying, "God is not needed to explain a conversion any more than Jupiter is needed to explain lightning".

Later de Fursac's interest was captured by accounts of Roberts' strange behaviour in Neath when he withdrew from most social contact and remained silent for seven days, communicating only in writing. By this stage of his career Roberts had enjoyed four months of triumph and sustained excitement and he was undoubtedly coming to believe he could rouse people well beyond the confines of Wales.

de Fursac believed that by this time Roberts had developed "exaltation of the self" and that this state of high arousal and excitement co-existed with rapidly disappearing resources of physical and mental energy. However, an "anaesthetised consciousness" did not allow this fatigue to be appreciated and as a result mental stability suffered. He termed this physical and mental exhaustion "psychological asthenia". de Fursac believed the combination of a state of exaltation and psychological asthenia inevitably led to a state of mind he called "hyper-activity of mental automatism".

Other descriptions of Evan Roberts during this retreat suggest an abnormal mobility of thinking, a state of high arousal characterised by rapid exaggerated responses to spoken and emotional stimuli. Notes that Evan Roberts had made during his silent retreat provide evidence enough of disturbed thinking; for example, he recorded that he saw a teapot and questioned, "Is it empty ... yes" it is empty because I am thirsty, ... I thought immediately of Calvary where those terrible words were uttered "I am thirsty".

During his tour de Fursac attempted to meet Evan Roberts on at least one occasion; the Evangelist was not at his home but de Fursac took tea with his doting mother. However, towards the end of his stay in Wales during a lull in a revivalist meeting, de Fursac noticed a man sitting in what he called "the reserved hemicycle" (presumably the area reserved for deacons) and he wrote: "I saw a large young blond man. He had a nice and very mobile face – I looked at him closely and then I recognised him. It was Evan Roberts. I must admit that from that moment on I fixed my attention upon him and only half listened to the preacher. What really struck me about this Welsh Evangelist was the extraordinary mobility of his expression. If ever the face and stance of a person could be called the mirrors of the soul it would be very true with Evan Roberts. One could see there, within a few seconds, astonishment, sadness, joy, irritation; he frowned, raised his head or let it down in distress; his lips pouted silently and finished up in a large smile. Sometimes a certain word from a Preacher would make him jump as if waking from a dream. These never ending gestures were the involuntary translation of what was happening in his consciousness. Psychologically, it boiled down to a series of automatic actions, and really, this automatism was so intense, the absence of self possession so complete, that, despite oneself one had the impression of being in front of a strange case, at the very extreme limits of normality, just one more step and we would have been opposite " 'maniac automatism' ".

Eventually the service ended and he says that Evan Roberts was presented to him saying, "Very glad to meet you", and with a very warm handshake. During the whole of their short time together Roberts did not let go of de Fursac's hand. They talked a while about alcoholic conversions and de Fursac told him that he admired the results that the re-awakening had obtained in this sector. Roberts replied "Oh yes, many have become sober. Jesus is so good that he has even taken away their taste for alcohol".

Evan Roberts was well known for his interest in hand-shaking and for holding a person's hand during conversation. He had written: "There is a power and a secret in a hand-shake. One star is different from another; likewise, one hand-shake is different from another. It is the Holy Spirit who has taught me how to shake hands".

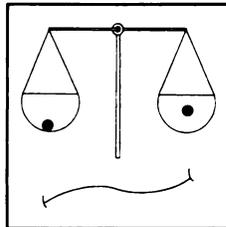
de Fursac observed several times that Revivalism had not prospered in the cities of Cardiff and Swansea nor in the middle and professional classes. It had prospered with people who were Welsh-speaking, steeped in a Welsh cultural heritage and religiosity. These factors have preserved a religious cast of thought and way of life which provided fertile soil for revivals which had been an episodic feature of Welsh life since the 18th century. de Fursac believed he observed a slow erosion of these influences and, therefore, expressed doubts that Wales would ever again provide a home for a similar revival.

This had, therefore, been a very Welsh affair with an interesting French connection.

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