

conditions of maximum secrecy, and the ultimate success of the programme is in itself a story of epic proportions.

The laboratory was singularly fortunate in its long line of distinguished directors starting with Colonel James and ending with Professor Garnham. However, few would doubt that the real star of the show was the late Mr C. P. Shute, who joined the laboratory at its inception in 1925 and then rose from the ranks to serve as its assistant director from 1944 until its

closure in 1973. This remarkable man, by trade a baker, was by an act of providence transmuted into a world-class scientist. He had the added virtue of being articulate as his innumerable papers bear witness.

There is a fitting epilogue. The Wellcome Museum has generously undertaken the safekeeping of the laboratory's memorabilia and in so doing one of the heroic chapters of the history of medicine of our time will be preserved.

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## Psychiatry and the media

### Cold comfort

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A psychiatrist's interest in human suffering is not restricted to daily work. Trainees in Oxford, asked to pick out six novels which had been important to them, chose books concerned with "alienation, sexuality and suicide" (Harrison & Day, 1988). Respondents to such a survey in the future might well include *The Comforts of Madness* (Sayer, 1988), surprise winner of the Constable Trophy for fiction in 1988 and subsequently the coveted Whitbread prize. It is former psychiatric nurse Paul Sayer's first book. He started writing in his twenties after taking a break from nursing to run a corner shop with his wife. In his spare time he read. He explains, "I was standing in the corner shop one day, and I just felt this urge to write" (Winder, 1989). He returned to nursing and at the same time, started to write about a world that was familiar to him.

*The Comforts of Madness* is the story of a catatonic, Peter, the silent narrator of the novel. To the rest of the world he is an abandoned inert body, but his own consciousness is vital and reflective. With chilling detachment Peter reflects on his life history and his changing relationships with other people. The book opens at the start of another day on the long-stay ward of a mental hospital. "I had hoped to remain unturned, but it was not to be. The night nurse came with the first ashes of dawn, ripping back the bedcovers, sighing audibly, then tossing back the counterpane while he went in search of clean linen. None of this was particularly remarkable; it was the same every morning." On this morning though one of the patients has cut his throat. Peter senses he would be implicated; "their wish to find a scapegoat

for the night nurse's inefficiency would be irresistible"; he wonders what his fate will be. He finds himself summoned to the ward office to silently account for himself before his doctor, the "consultant, judge and jury, a maker of decisions". There he also encounters Anna, director from the New World Rehabilitation Centre. She is fighting to prove the effectiveness of her centre's experimental regime to higher authorities, who have challenged her to tackle a difficult case such as Peter's.

Peter is transported to the New World Centre, where neglect is replaced by the most brutal humanity. The silent threat of the catatonic to the success of the new enterprise is too much for Anna's co-director, "God, but you're a cunning bastard . . . If I were not a scientific man I would say you were the devil himself . . . If I ever come across your case again I shall not be able to account for my actions. How do you do it? What demon's secret have you learned? Tell me. Tell me now, you bastard. Tell me!"

The story is highly disturbing and starkly related. We share Peter's feelings of alienation while experiencing the reality of his plight. There is a horrid fascination in trying to discover how a boy could have slipped into such hell as an adult.

### References

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