

## Book Reviews

### **THE MATER – THE STORY OF A BELFAST TEACHING HOSPITAL AND ITS COMMUNITY**

**Dr Mark Gormley, Mary Hinds, 160 pages. Publisher: Dr Claude Costecalde 2015. ISBN 978-1-906886-67-7. RRP £15.00**



This elegantly produced book outlines the history of the Mater since it opened as a 28 bedded hospital on 1 November 1883.

In 1899 it expanded to 150 beds. Funding was provided by charitable donations, including a Grand 6 day Bazaar in the Ulster Hall. Later the Working Men's Maintenance Committee contributed generously. In 1948 the 'Young Philanthropists' had the brilliant idea of setting up a football pools company, and this raised many millions over the succeeding years.

At the inception of the NHS in 1948 the Unionist Government failed to offer guarantees similar to those given to voluntary hospitals in the rest of the UK, and the Mater had to survive independently until 1972.

The book reflects the Mater as part of its society. In 1886 it treated hundreds of casualties from the Home Rule riots in which over 50 were killed (la plus ca change!). In 1922 government forces fired at the hospital using a machine gun from Crumlin Road Prison. During the blitz there was bomb damage to the Nurses' Home. In 1976 Sinn Fein's Vice-President Maire Drumm was murdered in her hospital bed.

Staff were not immune from the violence. In 1972 consultant ophthalmologist Peter Gormley's car was ambushed. He was shot and his son Rory was killed. The son of consultant surgeon Paddy Lane was also murdered in 1972.

Astonishingly, consultants were not paid until the 1950s! (They were expected to survive on private practice). After this they received an 'honorarium', but this was much less than the salary of NHS Consultants.

First recognised for medical student and nurse training in 1899 the Mater has a long and proud tradition of teaching which continues to this day. Of note, in the 1920s nurses had to be 5' 2" in height and 8 stones in weight!

The first Mater doctor was (later Sir) Alex Dempsey. The hospital appointed the first full time anaesthetist in Ireland, Dr Claire McGucken, in 1923. In 1952 Dr Pearse O'Malley opened the first inpatient psychiatric unit in a general hospital in Ireland. In 1985 the Mater became the first hospital to offer day surgery for cataracts.

Throughout the 'Troubles' the Mater, which has long been the hospital of choice for the people of the Shankill Road as

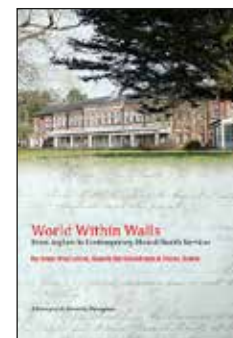
well as North Belfast and further afield, treated a remarkable number of patients and saved very many lives. The Emergency Department, despite several incidents when riot police had to be called, was a true oasis of healing, situated in an area which witnessed dreadful violence for over three decades.

This book, which is well laid out and generously illustrated with a range of photographs old and new is a fitting tribute to one of Northern Ireland's finest public institutions.

Dr Philip McGarry  
Consultant Psychiatrist

### **WORLD WITHIN WALLS: FROM ASYLUM TO CONTEMPORARY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES. A HISTORY OF ST. DAVNETS, MONAGHAN.**

**Anne McClelland, Niamh Nic Ghabhann, and Fiona Byrne. ISBN: 9781782804581 Available from local Monaghan bookshops at €25.**



The story of Ireland's psychiatric asylums is a remarkable one. From the opening of the Cork Lunatic Asylum in 1791, and with changes to public attitudes and legislation throughout the 1800s, a series of asylums was established throughout Ireland. The numbers hospitalised were astonishing (increasing from 3,234 to 11,265 in the 40 years to 1891 - this at a time of a falling population), persistent and slow to decline. Ireland led the world in this: by 1961 one in every 70 Irish people over the age of 24 was in a psychiatric hospital bed. Several arguments have been advanced to account for this: the medicalisation of destitution; therapeutic zeal; philanthropic enthusiasm; and increased prevalence (rather than incidence) of illness because of the improvement in life expectancy. An important perpetuating factor was the centrality of the asylum to the life of the community, not least as a significant employer.

World Within Walls is an account of one such asylum that served Cavan and Monaghan, from its beginnings in 1869 as the Monaghan District Lunatic Asylum, until the closure of the St Davnet's Psychiatric Hospital acute inpatient unit in 2012. It is topped and tailed by two excellent essays: a short summary of Ireland's asylum system by Professor Brendan Kelly, and a personal perspective by the first chair of Ireland's Mental Health Commission Dr John Owens, credited with the remodelling of the Cavan/Monaghan mental health service – which became the model for psychiatric services in the Republic of Ireland and further afield.

The essential core of this book, however, is the history told in the personal experiences of patients and staff. Although it is impossible to summarise here this account of 150 years of experience, the impression is of a largely enlightened and compassionate workforce, delivering care in difficult

circumstances, and when resources from public funds were often limited. They juggled with many of the difficulties the modern practitioner will recognise: overcrowding; the risks of institutionalisation; staff concerns about working conditions and pay; and the physical health of the patients. There are detailed records of the contribution of St Davnet's Hospital to the local community, such as the hospital's football team and the St Davnet's Players, reflecting its importance in the life of Monaghan. The amount of detail is rich, sometimes excessively so, with accounts of ancient conflicts among staff that the casual reader might consider had been deservedly forgotten.

Frequently in such histories the voice of patients is less audible, unsurprisingly, and often via third parties alone – staff, for example. The World Within Walls project uses oral testimony to supplement its history gathering, to good effect.

Through this, a sense emerges of a patient experience that could be dreary, regimented and boring, with little privacy.

The dramatic transformation of the local psychiatric service in the last twenty years, which became a template for the rest of Ireland, was perhaps the greatest legacy of the institution. With a declining inpatient population, and the increasing recognition of the importance of community care, the days of the asylum were numbered. The asylum system of Ireland, examined through a modern lens, has often been pilloried and seen as a flawed system that outlived its time and in which far too many were hospitalised. Nevertheless, it was staffed in the main by compassionate and dedicated individuals, who strove with diligence to provide care. This book is an important account of the experience of staff and patients alike, and will provide an enduring legacy.

Dr Nial Quigley, Consultant Psychiatrist.