

Historical Perspectives on Mental Health and Psychiatry

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Introduction

Robairt Clough was a long-term patient at Holywell Psychiatric Hospital in Antrim (Northern Ireland). In the Christmas 1972 edition of the patients' magazine, he wrote the following verses:

Little drops of medicine,
Little coloured pills,
Cure us of all ailments,
Cure us of all ills.

Doctors with a stethoscope,
Doctors with a bag,
Make us fit and healthy,
Cheer us when we flag.

Pretty little nurses
Nurses bold and strong,
Nurses with a banjo,
Nurses sing a song.

Wardsmaids with the dinner,
Wardsmaids with the tea,
Keep our tummies happy,
Until the day we're free.¹

This little ditty from 1972 draws attention to some of the dominant themes in the social history of mental health and psychiatry in Britain from the 1960s to the 2010s. These include the championing of psychopharmacology (those 'little coloured pills'), symbolic representations of psychiatric authority (stethoscope and medicine bag), the emotional management of patients ('pretty little nurses' with their songs), cultures of conviviality (keeping tummies happy) and, of course, the ominous mood instilled by disciplinary practices and environments (they wait 'Until the day we're free'). The ditty acknowledges the *social* meanings generated when psychiatric patients and health professionals meet. Each participant brings to the encounter a multitude of identities based on gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, generation, age, religion and ideological dogmas as well as memories of past encounters, sensual perceptions and embodied knowledges. As a result, any overview of the history of British psychiatry needs to grapple with the tension between temporally fluid *societal* contexts and the sensual intimacy of very *personal* human