

# POINTS OF VIEW

BY THE BY:

## The Cockerel and the Clergy

*You have to drive carefully. It's a single track road that scrambles and twists over a desolate Hebridean moor. Just beyond the last house and clatter of a loom, grass breaks through the asphalt, and the camber can be unnervingly wrong. Two miles on, the road peters out between a cemetery and sandy beach. This day there's unexpected company. An irritable American gets out of his car, mooches about in the drizzle, returns to tell his wife, "Nuttin but goddam rocks, heather and sheep". They drive away. All alone now. I walk past a bier half-hidden by ferns, past watchful headstones and up the side of a hill to the ruins of six cottages. Only the double stone walls remain. The last residents moved out early this century. Below the cottages is a circle of stones, possibly a fank. Beside the circle are the outlines of lazy beds. Shut your eyes. There's the smell of peat and wrack and oily wool. Listen to the squabble of birds, to the rhythm of streams that play hide-and-seek on their way to the sea. I spend three hours on that familiar hillside, once again populating it in my imagination. Even if you have read something like Martin Martin's account of the western isles, you still wonder how on earth people lived and moved and had their being in that remotest of places, whether it was 200 or 500 years ago.*

*How did they cope when they were ill or injured, and there were no doctors about? Lie down and die? Emphatically not. They healed themselves. At least, tried to. Mary Beith (1995) has written an absorbing book on traditional therapies in the Scottish Highlands. Since readers of this journal have specialist interests, I'll try to do a pick-and-mix job. But, first two general points. Like most other writers on the topic, Beith stresses that it wasn't all darkness, superstition and pagan ritual on the side of the self-healers. Sometimes there was logic and sound common sense. And they were acutely aware of the placebo effect. Nor, when qualified physicians appeared on the scene, was it all scientific effectiveness on their side. It's just that they made it sound so, often in stentorian tones. The other point is simply that old habits die hard. Beith mentions a well between Muir of Ord and Avoch which is festooned with clouties (wee rags), old and new. I can take you, here in Northern Ireland, to a similar well on the shores of Lough Neagh. Fishermen still take pebbles from it as protection against drowning. I can also take you to a couple of wells in Donegal where, in addition to clouties, you'll find other personal belongings - lighters, biros, rosaries, hairpins.*

*Let's take epilepsy. Whom might an epileptic be advised to consult? Men of the cloth were a good bet. Some argued that only Roman Catholic clergy had the healing gift. Others claimed Protestant clergy were also effective. Or the affected person could consult a footling (a person breech born). In seventeenth century Ireland the best bet was Valentine*

*Greatracks, quite literally a dab hand at the disease. What about the therapies themselves? One of the most widely quoted cures involved burying a black cockerel at the spot where the epileptic had had his first attack. If you look for a theory behind this, you'll find two or three. There was, for example, the transference notion: the disease, sickness or possession was passed from person to bird. Why should the cockerel be black? Dozens and dozens of reasons. Epilepsy was called by some the "black disease". A seizure was evidence of demoniac possession, perhaps by the prince of darkness or one of his pals. And so on.*

*One variant of the technique also required the oldest God-fearing man in the neighbourhood to keep vigil all night at the spot and not let a fire go out. Suppose, after all this, the epileptic continued to have seizures, as was of course quite likely. That didn't necessarily invalidate the technique. Much more likely, so it was reasoned, the prescription had gone wrong somewhere: out there in the cold and the rain, the old man's piles were giving him trouble, so he tottered off home early, hoping no-one would notice; being a bit gaga he'd forgotten all about the fire and had let it go out; his piety was a load of blarney. Sir Arthur Mitchell, one of the ablest medical men of his day, was incredulous and scathing when he learned, some time around the 1860s, that the practice was not just a rural phenomenon - it had occurred more than once in an unnamed city.*

*However, the physicians had their problems too. In his classic book, Oswei Temkin (1945), himself a neurologist, says of the late eighteenth century, "A change of mind which leads to the renunciation of old beliefs usually also leads to the creation of new ones, and superstitions are often exchanged rather than abandoned. The same enlightened physicians as moulded our modern concept of 'superstition', relegating to it all notions of occult forces, established a new superstitious belief. They claimed that epilepsy could be caused by masturbation. . ." (page 219). For more than 150 years this causal link was cited in the medical literature. Tissot even wrote a treatise on onanism. So castration became one of the therapies, at least in extreme cases. Given the improbable choice between the highland therapy and this drastic operation, most patients would, I suspect, tell you that, quite coincidentally, their best friend was this saintly old man, lives just around the corner, chronic insomniac, keeps poultry, loves nothing better than warming himself by a good going fire.*

*Blood letting was at one time widely practised for all sorts of conditions, including epilepsy. It went quietly out of favour in and around the middle of the last century. But, as Beith recounts, it continued in the highlands long after. My mother, Hebridean born and bred, remembered a relative having blood taken from her by a local, to a "soup plate full". An epileptic boy, living near the river Bush in County Antrim, was cured when the local dominie bled him to "a pound and a half". Some highlanders asked to be bled twice a year as a matter of routine. In the absence of a doctor, the local clergyman or teacher was happy to oblige.*

*What about learning disability? A lady writing in the long since defunct **Caledonian Medical Journal** recalled, some time between 1902 and 1903, that having a handicapped child was regarded as punishment from God visited on erring parents. All the same, "No harm would ever befall them (children with learning disabilities) in this world, as they were understood to be under the special protection of Providence; and . . . they are certain*

to have a double share of wits in the next world". A Dr. Macleod, writing in an earlier issue of the same journal, fondly recalled two or three adults with a mild learning disability who were real characters in the village, well-liked, kindly treated.

One of the beliefs about mental illness was completely new to me. This was to the effect that a shock had displaced the patient's heart (in a literal translation from gaelic, the heart had jumped out of its "husk", thus bringing on insanity). On the principle that like cures like, an old remedy involved firing a gun near the unsuspecting patient. Another remedy: "Some melted lead, after the aid of the Trinity had been invoked, was poured into a wooden vessel containing water, which had been placed on the patient's head, and if any piece of the solidified lead at all resembled a heart, it was taken and turned round, with the result that the patient's heart returned to its place, and the disease was cured". Other methods were much more physical. For example, the affected person would be towed behind a boat three times round an island. Or he might be thrown from a height into the sea.

I find all this stuff pretty riveting. The trouble is, others don't. A student came to see me last week about his dissertation on short-term memory. Within one minute I'd wrested the conversation round to old-time therapies. I misread all the signs: his convulsive jaw movements, watery eyes, sagging shoulders. It was only when he fell off the chair I realised he wasn't as interested as I'd hoped. But, then, less than an hour ago, one of the girls working here, Barbara, called in. I happened to mention Beith's casual reference to the belief that a man and wife who had the same surname before marrying were the people to consult about whooping cough. She told me this practice is alive and well - a couple two doors up from her are in that line of therapy. Oddly enough, some years ago I helped supervise a piece of work in which isonymy was used to determine levels of inbreeding in population isolates. The idea was to see whether there was a simple relationship between high levels and high prevalence rates of severe learning disability. In the isonymy method you go through marriage records, perhaps well back into the last century, and note the numbers of groom-and-bride pairs with the same surname. The more isolated the population, the fewer the surnames, the greater the degree of inbreeding. From whooping cough to coefficients.

Even more intriguing was Barbara's account of a family in her neighbourhood in the 1970s. One of the daughters in the brood of seven or eight was quite different from the others in build and appearance. Barbara's father, uncle (and others) were quite serious when they said the odd one out was a changeling. Pity the parents couldn't or wouldn't do something about getting their daughter back from the fairies. Fortunately, an old and drastic retrieval method went into desuetude long, long ago: if a child survived a drink (decoction) made of boiled foxglove, the technique was deemed successful. You wouldn't think that in this devout country you could serve God and goblin. But the more you hear the easier it is to understand how the belief systems can co-exist comfortably. From the general to the specific. Over forty years ago an uncle of mine recounted how a young man (there was no question of learning disability) was cured of bed-wetting, or nocturnal enuresis as we now say to sound just that bit more technical. The young man was a soldier during the Great War. He was ordered to sleep in an upper bunk on a thin layer of straw spread over wooden slats. In the lower bunk lay a light sleeper, well-muscled, short-

*tempered. It was a case, my uncle assured me, of what we would now call one-trial learning. You won't find this remedy in Beith's book, or, I guess, in any other.*

*I had hoped to dip into another book, a collection of pieces by Dr. David Rorie, on much the same theme. This practising doctor (1867 - 1946) was also interested in folk medicine and collected much of his material in mainland Scotland, especially in the east coast. But we'll leave that to another day perhaps. In the meantime, do read Beith's book. My copy cost £10, all but a penny.*

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### **References**

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