

## Washing Your Troubles Away: The History of Hydrotherapy and Mental Health

Picture the scene: an asylum for women in Claresholm, Alberta, summer 1933. Southern Alberta is in the grip of the Great Depression, but this Prairie town is also affected by drought.

Claresholm is in the midst of the Dust Bowl, so-called because the parched topsoil is easily whipped by the wind into filthy clouds that block out the sky. Sinclair Ross' 1941 short story 'The Lamp at Noon' summed up the melancholic atmosphere:

A little before noon she lit the lamp. Demented wind fled keening past the house: a wail through the eaves that died every minute or two. Three days now without respite it had held. The dust was thickening into an impenetrable fog (Ross, 1968).

Yet at the asylum, water is still being prioritised for a specific therapeutic purpose. Three women are being prepared to be placed in a cold water pack. They dutifully lie down in a tub and are wrapped up head to toe in saturated blankets. They will lie in these watery cocoons for three hours. Afterwards it is expected that they will be calmer, more lucid and, more manageable. The common phrase found in the asylum records is 'more quiet and cooperative', which suggests that water may also be used coercively to control patients. Records of the asylum's daybooks indicate that patients mainly comply with hydrotherapy. However, on rare occasions, patients don't consent at all and are forced into the packs. Only a fraction of the asylum's 100 patients receive this treatment, not least because it is a time- and labour-intensive therapy requiring significant amounts of space, bathtubs and water. But for the patients subject to this treatment it is a daily ritual, whether they like it or not, one not even interrupted by the worst drought in memory. Unfortunately, the asylum records reveal little about how the patients felt about the treatment.

Water has been used a treatment for body and mind for millennia. Records from medical literature, asylum archives and local history reveal a variety of approaches to hydrotherapy. Some of the earliest medical facilities, the *aesclēpieia* found in Ancient Greece and Rome and named after the god of healing Asclepius, were famous for their healing springs, which were used for both physical and mental ills. Foreshadowing the spas that would pop up throughout Europe and North America centuries later, *aesclēpieia* represent an early example of health tourism. *Aesclēpieia* were typically located next to thermal or freshwater springs or the sea, in secluded and calming environments. They were centres of pilgrimage, as well as healing. In fact, the two went together. Although Hippocrates attempted to make medicine rational through his

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humoural system, removing it from the realm of religion and the gods, healing was still connected with spirituality in the Ancient world.

Water, spirituality and healing would continue to be interlinked in early Christianity. If you look at an Ordnance map of many parts of Britain and especially Ireland, you'll find dozens of holy wells, springs and fountains indicated. Many of these spots were associated with healing, including the relief of mental illness. As Sir Walter Scott writes in *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808):

Thence to Saint Fillan's blessed well  
Whose springs can frenzied dreams dispel,  
    And the crazed brain restore:  
St Mary grant that cave or spring  
Could back to peace my bosom bring,  
    Or bid it throb no more!

Scott doesn't describe what would actually occur at the well. But we have accounts of such procedures and they're not always what you'd expect. In *Observations Made in a Journey through the Western Counties of Scotland* (1799), Robert Heron describes what would happen at St Fillan's Well in Perthshire, Scotland. A patient was first taken around a nearby cairn three times, where they would lay an offering of clothes or heather. They were then dunked in the sacred pool. The sodden patient would then be bound hand and foot and left in the local chapel:

If found loose in the morning, good hopes were entertained of his full recovery. If still bound, his cure was doubtful. It sometimes happened that death relieved him during his confinement from the troubles of life.

At Loch Maree, in northwest Scotland, a somewhat kinder ritual prevailed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as described by James Hack Tuke in *Chapters in the History of the Insane in the British Isles* (1882). A patient would be placed in a boat and paddled around an island in the loch. As the boat proceeded around the island, they would be 'jerked into the water at intervals'. Back on land, the patient would drink some water from the well and tie an offering to a tree (likely a rag or 'clood'), going 'home in a state of happy tranquillity',

Sometimes persistence was thought to be crucial. In JT Bright's *Ancient Crosses and Other Ancient Antiquities in the West of Cornwall* (1857), he depicts how at St Nonna's Well in Cornwall during the seventeenth century, a frantic person would be bowsened or dunked repeatedly by a 'strong fellow' into the frigid water 'until the patient, by foregoing his strength, had somewhat forgot his fury'. After this ordeal, the patient would be taken to the church, where masses would be sung for them. If the patient relapsed, they would be taken back to be 'bowsened again and again, while there remained any hope of recovery'.

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Given the importance of the sacrament of baptism, the association of holy wells and healing make sense. Water has long been seen as a spiritual purifier. But it is also easy to read other explanations for water's role with respect to healing mental illness. During the period of humoral medicine, which endured from the time of Ancient Greece up until the nineteenth century, either cold or warm water, could play a key role in balancing the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile), a necessary condition for good health. While cold water could stimulate the melancholic individual, warm water could calm the manic. Some also argued, a little like the proponents of ice-water baths today, that the shock of the cold could 're-boot' the system, almost like restarting a computer.

By the seventeenth century, physicians were also turning to hydrotherapy. The approach of Flemish physician and chemist Jean Baptise Van Helmont resembled that applied at St Nonna's Well. Patients would be immersed in cold water until just before the point of drowning in the hope that near-death would 'kill the mad idea' in the patient. But a much more attractive approach to hydrotherapy was also emerging: the restorative setting of a spa.

Spas began popping up all over Europe, beginning in the seventeenth century and peaking in the nineteenth century, by which time they had also become a phenomenon in North America, New Zealand and elsewhere. Placenames including 'Spa', 'Wells' or 'Water', along with the eponymous Bath and Spa (located in Belgium) reveal their locations. Although spas were commonly used to treat physical conditions, such as rheumatism and gout, many spa doctors claimed that their spas were effective in treating nervous conditions. Strathpeffer, Buxton and Harrogate spas were all said to good for hysteria, neurasthenia and, during the First World War, even shell shock. A wide variety of approaches were employed in 'the cure', including cold and warm baths, high-pressure showers, steam, whirlpools, water packs, and alternating cold and hot sprays (the Scotch douche), as well as drinking the water itself. Patients were simultaneously prescribed a restricted diet (no doubt helpful in those cases of gout), advised to go on walks in the surrounding countryside and typically asked to refrain from smoking or alcohol, all of which likely contributed to recovery.

In addition to the letters of famous patients, such as Charles Darwin and Thomas Carlyle, we can learn about the experience from numerous published accounts, such as R. J. Lane's *Life at the Water Cure* (1851) or Edward Lytton's *Confessions of a Water-Patient* (1845). Although patients clearly flocked willingly to spas, spa doctors marketed their cures aggressively, with few qualms about exaggeration. As such, spas certainly had both their critics and their supporters within the medical profession. While some physicians regarded hydrotherapy as quackery, others advised

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their patients to visit spas and experience the ‘cure’. Regardless, by the nineteenth century, their methods were also being picked up by another contemporary phenomenon: the asylum.

Many asylum superintendents in Europe and North America believed hydrotherapy to be one of the most effective forms of treatment at their disposal. While some of the more elaborate methods were employed, some superintendents simply recommended the calming effects of a warm bath. We also see evidence, however, of hydrotherapy being used coercively alongside other questionable measures, such as mechanical restraint and, by the twentieth century, insulin shock therapy and lobotomy. The memoir of patient Ebenezer Haskell in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, for example, provides illustrations of a patient being forced to lie naked on his back on the floor, while an attendant standing on a chair pours buckets of water on him. In other asylums, patients were subject to continuous baths lasting possibly days at a time. So, was hydrotherapy a treatment or used as a form of restraint or punishment? As in many cases in the history of the asylum, the answer would vary depending on the nature of the asylum, its superintendent and its staff. But contemporary medical literature and archival documents from asylums in North America, Britain and elsewhere during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries do suggest that water was used therapeutically at a time when few other treatments were available.

When other treatments, beginning with electroconvulsive therapy, insulin shock therapy and lobotomy -and, by the 1950s, psychopharmacology, became available, the use of hydrotherapy faded away. But with the recent popularity of outdoor swimming, hydrotherapy is experiencing a rebirth, with swimmers often emphasising how it improves their mental health. An example of this occurs each New Year’s Day in Edinburgh, when hundreds of people brave the freezing Firth of Forth in the – possibly aptly, possibly ironically – ritual of the ‘Loony Dook’.

Personally, I am a wimp when it comes to cold water, associating it not with healing properties, but with hypothermia. I have tried to overcome my fears and one day found a perfect spot in the River Garry, north of Pitlochry, where I could float in the current, basking in the glorious landscape. I am not a religious person, but it was about as close as I come to being spiritual. Perhaps the Ancients were right after all.

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