

“The world outside these walls”: The Provincial Lunatic Asylum, the Press, and the Psychiatric Profession in Ontario, 1841-1857

Maximilian Smith, PhD Candidate, York University

In 1857, Dr. Joseph Workman, the superintendent of Toronto’s Provincial Lunatic Asylum, complained to a correspondent of having to deal with constant threats to “publish” from his staff. After firing a nurse for forcing a patient to make her a new frock, Workman claimed that she “threatened in the East end of the city she would publish something that would make me sorry.” Another disgruntled employee threatened that he would “publish [Workman] in the newspapers” after being laid off.¹ Though the doctor shrugged these threats off in his letter (he apparently told the nurse that “if she had anything to publish, the public interests demanded that no time should be lost”²), it was evident to his staff that the press was a formidable force in shaping public perceptions of the asylum and its management. Workman was not the first superintendent of the Toronto asylum to receive such threats, nor indeed the first to be properly “published.” In fact, four of his five predecessors either resigned or were relieved of their duties in the wake of a series of public scandals that played out in the pages of Toronto’s newspapers. In each case, the asylum’s government-appointed Board of Commissioners, its medical superintendent, and its assortment of attendants battled for authority over the institution’s daily management. In each of these conflicts, the authority of the medical superintendent was challenged by the commissioners and one or more members of their lay staff. Lacking the requisite knowledge to attack the superintendents on the grounds of asylum medicine, the attendants and commissioners (and, later, the press) sought to undermine the authority of the asylum’s chief medical officers by emphasizing their roles as public servants. Thus, narratives of treatment and medical care at the asylum became subsumed in public debates about political patronage, corruption, and the misappropriation of public funds. These accusations, whether proven or unfounded, had an undeniable impact upon medical care at the asylum, as a revolving door of physicians struggled to implement their treatments amidst continuous staff insurrection and public scrutiny. This study examines how the governing ideology of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum came to be associated more with politics and public works than

¹ Archives of Ontario, MS 516, Reel 12, Joseph Workman to William Lyon Mackenzie, March 2, 1857.

² Ibid.

with the care of the insane in Toronto's public discourse, and how local newspapers contributed to a dramatic paradigm shift in the ideology of asylum care in mid-nineteenth-century Ontario.

The letters, editorials, and articles about the asylum which appeared in Toronto's daily and weekly newspapers observed two typical philosophies of asylum management. First, and most often, they protested the mismanagement of the government funds which were allocated to the operation of the asylum. Second, they advocated for the proper care and treatment of the insane. These philosophies were by no means mutually exclusive, and sometimes appeared together in the same columns. However, it would seem that the "public interests," as Joseph Workman called them, were more attuned to the former ideal of asylum management. In his history of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, historian James Moran notes that the community's understanding of the asylum's function was very much informed by its status as a public institution.³ Though the press did report on medical treatment, accusations of political patronage and the misappropriation of government funds were far more likely to generate attention. Even when the treatment of the insane was addressed, it was often subsumed in lengthy debates about political intrigues at the asylum. This is not to suggest that the public did not care about the proper treatment of insanity. Rather, asylum medicine was not widely understood and the concept of specialized institutions for the rehabilitation of lunatics was fairly novel. Only in the first half of the nineteenth century did public asylums begin to emerge in any significant number throughout Britain, Europe and North America. Where insanity was publicly discussed, it was most often in vague general terms of charity and the obligations of society to care for the indigent insane. Conversely, notions of political patronage and financial waste were all too familiar to the residents of Toronto, who turned to the papers every day to read about the latest government controversies.⁴ From the mid-1930s, some members of the press questioned the necessity of a public asylum in Upper Canada, and suspected ulterior motives for its proposal:

To far less honorable motives is [Parliament's] feint of an exaction for a Lunatic Asylum ascribed by some. The amount of public advantage is deemed too

³ James E. Moran, *Committed to the State Asylum: Insanity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Quebec and Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 48-9.

⁴ During the 1930s, while the possibility of a state-funded asylum was being discussed in Parliament, the fate of the Clergy Reserves was also being fiercely debated. The crux of the debate was whether these tax funds would be disbursed among all Protestant sects, or only to the Anglican Church, as was the practice until that point. The issue was reported daily in Toronto's newspapers.

inconsiderable... The majority of the Legislative Council being deeply interested in the success of the Banks already established, have been swayed by disgraceful self-interest to have recourse in their extremity to the device of endowing Lunatic Asylums, to thwart the establishment of new Banks.⁵

Not everyone suspected a grand conspiracy among self-interested bankers, however. Others asserted that “an institution, where the unhappy class of our fellow creatures who have lost their reason, could be protected and reclaimed, would be a public blessing—for the granting of which our Representatives would receive the thanks of every benevolent heart.”⁶ Nevertheless, Workman and his fellow superintendents found themselves more often than not confronted with public narratives of conspiracy, patronage, and scandal.

Even when public attention turned to matters of medical care and treatment at the asylum, it was not long before financial and political concerns also entered the discussion. William Rees, the first superintendent of the asylum, experienced first-hand the sting of public censure when two reports were published in the *British Colonist* in 1844, three years after the asylum officially opened its doors in January of 1841. The first of the reports, detailing the inspection of the asylum’s temporary quarters⁷ by the Grand Jury, noted the “inadequacy of the accommodation which it affords for the number of patients confined therein.” The second report published in the paper, that of Dr. William Dunlop, was much more complimentary: “The medical treatment, so far as I am able to judge, is as good as can be...and all the patients seem as happy as their circumstances will admit of.”⁸ No doubt curious at the disparity of these comments, an anonymous reader responded four days later, under the pseudonym “Honesty,” accusing Dr. Rees of mobilizing the press and abusing his influence over the asylum’s commissioners in order to avoid an inquest into his methods of treatment:

The publication of [Dr. Dunlop’s] report at this time is undoubtedly a trick of the Medical Superintendent. It is well known that he is afraid of an investigation into the medical treatment of the patients, and from the influence he possesses over some of the Commissioners, has succeeded in more than one instance, in preventing an inquiry when it was about to take place.⁹

⁵ *Correspondent & Advocate*, May 4 1836.

⁶ *Kingston Chronicle & Gazette*, February 25, 1835.

⁷ The permanent structure would not be completed until 1850. From 1841 until 1850, patients were housed in the old gaol on King Street. Later, the temporary quarters were expanded to include a disused wing of the old Parliament buildings.

⁸ *British Colonist*, April 26, 1844.

⁹ *British Colonist*, April 30, 1844.

Similar allegations of Rees' preferential treatment appeared in the *Globe* a few months after the reports came to light. The *Globe* reported that Dr. Rees was the recipient of "favouritism" on the behalf of the Governor General, Sir Charles Metcalfe, and was "encouraged by the Government, in direct opposition to reports made by the Board."¹⁰ Rees' medical treatment—the initial subject of the published reports—did not remain the focus of the public's attention for long. Concerns over the management of the asylum appear to have gathered around its apparent susceptibility to the great evil of patronage, or "jobbing." While Rees' authority was challenged, as well as that of the government which appointed him, the challenge did not arise out of an informed debate about his methods. Undoubtedly, his professional ethics were called into question; yet it was political concerns, and not medical ones, which were so central to published attacks upon his character.

If Dr. Rees did indeed conspire to prevent an inquest, it was in vain. Just over three months after the reports were published, and only three days after the scathing column in the *Globe*, a response from the asylum commissioners was printed in the *British Colonist* at their behest. The new report detailed their inquiry into the allegations of the Grand Jury, with an introductory remark that "the presentment of the grand jury, and Dr. Dunlop's report, require some public explanation from this Board."¹¹ The language of the report suggests that the publication of the two prior reports, and most likely the hue and cry raised by the self-styled "Honesty," was enough to incite the Board of Commissioners to action. Interestingly, though their report pronounced the asylum habitable and Dr. Rees' treatments adequate, Rees' medical regime was only briefly mentioned. However, the commissioners were careful to distance themselves from any suggestion of patronage or preferential treatment of Rees. They confirmed that Rees had indeed submitted the two reports printed in the *British Colonist* months earlier, which they claimed included fabrications by the doctor, and further stated that "it is painful to have to add that the gentlemen [Dr. Rees] has for a long time by complaints and accusations, which your committee find to be groundless, disturbed the harmony that ought to exist between himself and both the stewards and the commissioners."¹² Whether or not the commissioners' allegations against Rees were true, each of the parties involved in the public controversy clearly understood that by publishing the details of their dispute, they

¹⁰ *Globe*, August 6, 1844.

¹¹ *British Colonist*, August 9, 1844.

¹² *Ibid.*

might mobilize an outcry (or at least the spectre of one) in order to achieve their ends. Certainly, the publication of either or both of the reports and the anonymous letter were enough to elicit the response of the commissioners, who sought to absolve themselves of any trace of political corruption and to defend, in print, the state of the asylum under their charge. The *British Colonist* unleashed a final salvo against Rees and the government when, a few days after publishing the commissioners' report, they alleged that the Governor General had conspired to have the report suppressed.¹³ According to the paper's editor, their object in reporting on patronage at the asylum was "the public satisfaction, and an exposure of the real state of matters within the institution." No further mention of the treatment of patients was made in the *British Colonist*, nor indeed any comment on the patients at all, except to mention in closing that "even the insane are worthy of consideration."¹⁴ Dr. Rees' clash with the commissioners did not last long. Before their antagonism could reach a climax, Rees was injured by a patient and resigned shortly thereafter in 1845. However, his brief controversy was only the first in a series of scandals which would plague the asylum, and most particularly its medical superintendents.

Doctor Rees' controversy demonstrates two facts about the nineteenth-century press in Toronto. First, the responses elicited by the publication of the scandal, from members of the public as well as the parties involved, suggest that Toronto's newspapers were considered a viable forum for the discussion of public affairs and the airing of grievances. As Michael Eamon suggests in his study of newspapers in British North America, messages found in print could be further discussed in various public spaces—editors were aware of their expanded audience, and so too were contributors.¹⁵ Second, the commissioners' investigation of Rees indicates the press' influence upon the outcome of intrigues at the asylum. While these facts are supported by an analysis of the events as they transpired in the pages of newspapers such as the *Globe* and the *British Colonist*, it is less readily apparent why these papers dedicated so much newsprint to the governance of the asylum in the first place, or why their attentions tended to settle more upon the politics of the asylum and its staffing than upon its medical management. After all, the foremost mandate of the asylum was the care of the insane, and not the employment and dismissal of its staff. Indeed, the

¹³ *British Colonist*, August 13, 1844.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Michael Eamon, *Imprinting Britain: Newspapers, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 10-11.

answers to these questions lay outside of the medical treatment and daily administration of the asylum, and instead in the political inclinations of the asylum's commissioners and superintendents, and of the editors of Toronto's daily and weekly newspapers.

Much of the distraction from the discourse about medical care at the asylum came from the contests for authority among the commissioners, superintendents, and attendants. The press neither fabricated nor contrived to inspire these conflicts, yet they gave them priority in their columns. The asylum was founded in a politically tumultuous period in Canadian history. Even as the legitimate need for a specialized institution for the insane was debated in Parliament in the 1830s, the balance of power began to shift from the old, conservative elite (known colloquially as the "Family Compact") to a more representative government. Though the British North America Act introduced responsible government and reformed Upper and Lower Canada into the Province of Canada in 1840, tension mounted between lingering loyalist and conservative elements of government and self-styled Reformers, who were themselves divided between moderate and radical factions. Toronto's print industry was likewise divided. The *British Colonist*, headed by editor Hugh Scobie, took a fairly moderate stance, though Scobie enraged Reformers when he supported conservative Governor General Sir Charles Metcalfe during the constitutional crisis of 1843-1844.¹⁶ On the other hand, partisan papers such as the *Globe*, the *Examiner*, and the *Mirror* published consistently in support of the Reform movement. These partisan tendencies were manifestly apparent in their reporting upon asylum matters. The *British Colonist* and the *Globe*'s treatment of the government and commissioners in the case of William Rees was notably divided, for example. George Brown, a politician and the editor of the *Globe*, accused Metcalfe of favouritism and dissension from the commissioners, whom he defended. Metcalfe was a professed loyalist who openly resisted the progression of responsible government in Canada and Brown, as an avowed Reformer, was keen to depict him as a corrupt agent of colonial rule, dispensing offices to those who supported him.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the *British Colonist* offered a different angle on

¹⁶ David Ouellette, "Hugh Scobie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/scobie_hugh_8E.html (accessed August 23, 2016).

¹⁷ Brown's stance on the government had changed notably by 1848. In his response to former superintendent Walter Telfer's public attempts to discredit the government and the commissioners after his dismissal for intoxication on the job, Brown came down firmly in support of the government. This was unsurprising, as the Reformist Baldwin-Lafontaine Ministry had Brown's unreserved public support.

the affair: Scobie elected to publish “Honesty’s” anonymous letter which levied the very same accusation of corruption against the Board of Commissioners, whose membership included notable Reformers John Ewart and Robert Jameson. Of course, the papers were not always one-sided, as the more temperate Scobie illustrated when he denounced the suppression of the commissioners’ report by Metcalfe, also calling the commissioners “highly honorable men” in a subsequent edition.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by 1848 the reporting in Toronto’s papers was often plainly coloured by political considerations, and the controversies yet to come would only make this partisanship more apparent, especially in the case of Brown’s *Globe*.

When Dr. Joseph Workman assumed the position of medical superintendent at the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in 1854, he was well aware of the scandals that had plagued the institution for years. He had no doubt read about them in the papers, even entering the fray himself upon at least one occasion as the editor of the *Mirror*.¹⁹ He found himself at the centre of his own public controversy in 1857 when he was accused of mismanagement by James Magar, a porter at the asylum, in a letter to the *Globe*. What followed was a protracted libel suit, in which Workman charged George Brown with knowingly publishing Magar’s alleged lies. Indeed, Brown had long challenged Workman’s involvement at the asylum. In an editorial announcing Workman’s appointment as superintendent in 1853, Brown lamented that the contract was preferentially given to Workman instead of being filled by one of many other more suitable candidates, including “practitioners of the very highest repute.”²⁰ Brown proved in his coverage of the Rees affair that he considered the office of medical superintendent to be a prime situation for political patronage, and he evidently envisioned his dogged interventions in the the asylum’s affairs as a public service. Addressing the appointment of Dr. Workman’s predecessor, Dr. John Scott (who was, like Workman, an alleged beneficiary of patronage), Brown painted himself as nothing less than a crusader for the public good:

The happiness of thousands of families in the Province is in the hands of the Superintendent. . . Humanity, patriotism, and self-interest all claim at the hands of an intelligent people that such offices should be filled by men of eminent capacity for

¹⁸ *British Colonist*, August 13, 1844.

¹⁹ Workman held the position of editor at the *Mirror* in December of 1848, when he traded barbs with George Brown of the *Globe* regarding the dismissal of Dr. George H. Park, then superintendent of the asylum.

²⁰ *Globe*, April 3, 1854

the duties entrusted to them; and though our protest be too late in this case—it is still a public duty to enter it, in the hope that it may tell on similar occasions in the future.²¹

There was undeniable truth to Brown's accusations. Workman and his two predecessors, Dr. George H. Park and Dr. Scott, each undoubtedly benefitted from some form of patronage. Park was the brother-in-law of the well-connected former politician John Rolph. Rolph, who had been exiled to the United States for his complicity in the failed radical reformist rebellion of 1837 and subsequently pardoned under the general amnesty of 1843, established the Toronto School of Medicine upon his return. Rolph was accused by James Hervey Price, a Member of Parliament, of "compelling [the government] to alter the Bill for the Lunatic Asylum giving all power to Park that Rolph and his medical School might rule it for the School's benefit."²² After Park's dismissal (the result of yet another clash between superintendent, attendants, and commissioners), Toronto's Reform editors were disappointed to report that Scott, son-in-law of asylum commissioner Reverend John Roaf, given the position of superintendent. "The 'great chiseller' is triumphant...*Dr. Scott, son-in-law of Mr. Roaf, has been appointed Medical Superintendent!* Comment is unnecessary," remarked Francis Hincks, editor of the *Examiner*.²³ Brown was inclined to agree, quoting Hinck's accusation of jobbing and adding that "we deeply regret the appointment."²⁴ Scott's tenure lasted longer, perhaps, than it should have. He became embroiled in a media controversy shortly after his appointment, when he was found to have dissected the corpse of a patient. He weathered the storm, however, possibly owing to his connections on the Board of Commissioners. Nevertheless, Scott could not escape the intrigues at the asylum. After Rolph, now Commissioner of Crown Lands, introduced a bill to limit the power of the commissioners, Scott resigned.²⁵ Brown speculated that Rolph and his Clear Grits²⁶ had a "nice little plan to bring back Dr. Park."²⁷ But it was Workman, Rolph's partner in the School, who

²¹ *Globe*, February 28, 1850

²² G.M. Craig, "John Rolph," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/rolph_john_9E.html (accessed August 23, 2016).

²³ *Examiner*, February 27, 1850. Emphasis preserved from original article.

²⁴ *Globe*, February 28, 1850.

²⁵ Joe Dunlop, "Politics, Patronage, and Scandal at the Provincial Lunatic Asylum," *Ontario History* 98:2 (2006): 16.

²⁶ The Clear Grits were a Reform faction who favoured more radical democratic ideals than those held by the Reform ministry supported by Brown.

²⁷ *Globe*, July 12, 1853.

secured the position. Of Workman's appointment, Brown was no less critical, noting Rolph's interferences in the asylum's management and his relationship with Workman.²⁸

As with the Rees affair, Brown's reporting on Rolph's interactions with the Board of Commissioners and the appointment of Dr. Workman were coloured by his politics, however accurate his claims of patronage may have been. Brown took exception to the Clear Grits, and was quick to associate Workman's appointment with government waste and corruption—Brown's favoured ministry was replaced in 1851 by a new cabinet including two Clear Grit members. In the column announcing Workman's appointment, Brown noted several changes to the payment of medical officials at the asylum, declaring that “the extravagance of the Clear-grit economists...exceeds all the wastefulness of the [Family] Compact!”²⁹ It is no wonder then, that Workman assumed Brown was deeply involved in the publication of James Magar's allegations against him in 1857. Magar's statements to the press echoed Brown's accusations of patronage and incompetence:

Dr. Workman can do anything else than attend to his Medical duties. He has been sustained by the present corrupt government from graver charges, and until the moral pestilence of his superintendence stinks in the community, he is likely to continue his villainy and outrage.³⁰

Though Magar's accusations included Workman's alleged medical incompetence, the ensuing media frenzy surrounding Workman's libel suit had little to say of treatment at the asylum, with members of the press favouring the same narrative of political intrigue that they had in years past.

Workman resented being challenged in the papers. In his estimation, political intrigues of the sort peddled by Brown and his fellow newspapermen were nothing more than distractions from his real work: the treatment of his patients. “I love my patients, and they love me,” Workman declared to Mackenzie in a letter coinciding with his libel suit. “I detest the world outside these walls. You had rather be an editor. I had rather restore reason. You rejoice in the function of distracting it. God help the world!”³¹ However, neither Workman nor his predecessors could

²⁸ *Globe*, March 30, 1854.

²⁹ *Globe*, April 3, 1854.

³⁰ “Return to an Address...charges preferred against the management of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum,” *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada* (1857), Appendix No. 12.

³¹ Archives of Ontario, MS 516, Reel 12, Joseph Workman to William Lyon Mackenzie, March 2, 1857.

escape the world outside of the asylum walls, for the asylum was not a private establishment. As a state-funded institution, many felt that those who managed the asylum had an obligation to the public not only to perform their duty of caring for lunatics, but also to enact that duty in the most financially and politically responsible manner possible. Thus the asylum came to be publicly associated more with its status as a government institution than as a hospital. Workman cited his hated editors' lack of understanding of asylum medicine and management, lamenting to Mackenzie with unconcealed irony that "George Brown knows all about insanity and its treatment. He knows all about the structure and management of asylums. He never (in any time) had his foot in this asylum, but he is well posted up in all its details, wants, peculiarities, and faults."³² In his own circles, Workman came to be a respected and successful practitioner of asylum medicine. He was a prominent member of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, and he held his post as superintendent for just over twenty years, retiring of his own volition in 1875. Yet outside of the walls of his own profession, Workman could do little to impart his own vision of the asylum, not as a bastion of government corruption, but as a place of convalescence and healing. Historians have demonstrated that Canada's asylums increasingly functioned as custodial institutions, rather than convalescent hospitals, during and after Workman's tenure as superintendent. The cases of doctors Rees and Workman illustrate how medical care was understated in the public discourse in favour of a political narrative of the asylum's purpose and mandate. This shift in public thought no doubt contributed to the decline of the therapeutic ideal of asylum management in the later nineteenth century.

³² Archives of Ontario, MS 516, Reel 12, Joseph Workman to William Lyon Mackenzie, March 10, 1857