

Mental Health in Historical Perspective

Improving Psychiatric Care for Older People

Barbara Robb's
Campaign
1965-1975

Claire Hilton



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*To Samuel, Jacob and Benjamin and their friends who are trying
to make the world a better place.*

FOREWORD

My beloved grandmother died frail and confused in an overcrowded long-stay ward in a decrepit Victorian National Health Service hospital. There were so many beds in the ward there was barely room to stand between them. Nurses were seemingly indifferent towards their impossible task. In 1968 I was a bewildered and angry medical student with no idea how to voice my concerns at her evident distress and the lack of personal care. My parents too were troubled by the poor conditions, my grandmother's unkempt appearance, the meals left untouched and out of her reach, the terrible ward stench. They never made a formal complaint, hardly knew where to begin, and in any case my grandmother died soon after admission. I have no doubt that this experience was one of the triggers for my choice of career in the psychiatry of old age. I did not know then that there was a battle in progress in the late 1960s and early 1970s between those who grasped how widespread was the poor care of older people in the National Health Service and were determined to improve it and those lined up against them, the forces of denial inside the service, who really believed there was not much wrong and in any case thought there was nothing to be done about any shortcomings given the resourcing and public ignorance. At the vanguard of the battlefield was one remarkable woman, Barbara Robb, who published *Sans Everything: A Case to Answer* in 1967, a searing indictment of the conditions for older people in long-stay hospital wards, initiated by her own observations of the care of one of her psychotherapy patients.

In this book, Claire Hilton has set out the campaign waged by this one inimitable woman, her organisation Aid for the Elderly in Government

Institutions (AEGIS) and the long struggles to convince the Ministry and its constituent Regional Hospital Boards that the truth was as she described it and to get them to accept that change was necessary. There could be no better qualified person to document this enlightening story than Claire Hilton. Claire is a dedicated, talented clinician, a psychiatrist working with older people, who has for some years immersed herself in the history of the development of the specialty of old age psychiatry in the twentieth century. She has illuminated the period by bringing together the characters and politics of the influential clinical professionals, policy makers, public health observers, press and government funders. In this new work, Claire has drawn on her profound understanding of the period and, through further scrupulously detailed research, has exposed a story that has wider implications, showing how policy makers can be easily misled by misinformation when the truth is unpalatable. But what she has also given us here is a cracking good read, a compelling story of one woman's battle tragically cut short by Robb's too early death in 1976.

The fact is that the scandals have continued in National Health Service hospitals, but more often today in the myriad of independent-sector nursing and care homes that now provide the majority of long-term care for those institutionalised at the end of their lives. Scandals are no longer swept under the carpet, rather under many small rugs, as psychiatrist Klaus Bergmann so memorably put it and quoted by Claire in her disturbing final analysis of what has changed for the better and how much still needs to be done. In spite of the cautionary finale, this is an uplifting story, and anyone who is interested in how to campaign on a social issue will learn some invaluable lessons from this splendid book.

Elaine Murphy,
Baroness Murphy of Aldgate

PREFACE

In 1967, *Sans Everything: A Case to Answer*, was a best seller, a remarkable achievement for a nonfiction book about the unappealing subject of the poor care of older people in English psychiatric hospitals. The title and scandalous content remained familiar over the years, particularly to old age psychiatrists and others who aimed to provide high-quality mental health services for older people. None of them, however, could tell me anything about its author, Barbara Robb, although at the time she wrote, she was quite a celebrity, achieving both fame and notoriety. Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman wrote in his diary that she was a ‘terrible danger’ to the government, and a ‘bomb’ who had to be defused. With such an accolade, somewhere there had to be a story.

I first read *Sans Everything* in about 2006 after my husband bought it for me as a birthday present. The contents were gruesome, and like other readers, I focused on them, paying little attention to the chapters providing direction about how to improve care. Breathing a sigh of relief, I reassured myself that things aren’t nearly so bad today.

While undertaking related historical research, the names of several *Sans Everything* contributors came to light. Who were they? How did Barbara get them to write for her? Who were the people and places behind the pseudonyms? Who was ‘Miss Wills’ who Barbara rescued from ‘Cossett Hospital’? Who was Barbara? How did she get involved with the psychiatric hospitals, and what else did she do? These and other questions aroused my curiosity.

There are many reasons Barbara Robb was forgotten. She fought to improve provision for institutionalised older people and not for personal

acclaim. She was a thorn in the side of the National Health Service leadership who did not want to remember her, and both she and her husband, Brian, died prematurely. Half a century since publication of *Sans Everything*, it is time to reconsider the story behind it and its messages, much of which remains relevant to the care of unwell and frail older people today. Perhaps my sigh of relief was only partly justified.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Investigating Barbara Robb and *Sans Everything* was exhilarating, delving into archives and meeting many people who helped and offered much encouragement. Barbara's family were enthusiastic. Her cousin William Charlton and his wife, Anne, welcomed me to their home in Northumberland, and her great-niece Anna Charlton showed me round Hesleyside Hall. Barbara's niece Elizabeth Ellison-Anne lent me Barbara's photograph album depicting the years 1937–1941, and she, with friends Cynthia Bressani, John Gilliver and Colin Bowes, showed me round the family home, Burghwallis Hall, and the adjoining church. Sister Deirdre McCormack showed me round St Peter's Residence, and Constanza Isaza Martínez and Andrés Pantoja allowed me to wander round their home, the cottage where Barbara and Brian lived for many years. Charles and Robin Daniel, whose mother, Joyce, spoke out for more humane hospital provision in Cornwall, told me about her in the cottage where she lived. David Cochrane gave valuable advice at the beginning of the project, and Margaret Shepherd NDS, explained aspects of Roman Catholic practice. Other people told me about Barbara's life and times and provided archives and photographs: they are acknowledged in the endnotes. Anna Towlson, archivist at London School of Economics, was always helpful with my visits to, and queries about, Barbara's extensive archive. Many other archivists and librarians answered questions, retrieved documents and assisted with the project. Numerous historians offered constructive advice, including Tim Hurley, Michael Kandiah, Chris Knowles, Michael Passmore, Mary Salinsky, Sally Sheard, Kathleen Sherit, Mari Takayanagi and Pat Thane.

Tom Arie and David Jolley, my esteemed colleagues in old age psychiatry, read and commented on every chapter with great tact and patience. My husband, Michael, and sons, Samuel, Jacob and Benjamin, all guided me through computer hitches and accompanied me on visits to former psychiatric hospitals. Benjamin also gave advice on logical fallacies in the *Sans Everything* inquiries. Michael has been endlessly patient with the time spent on this project and has enjoyed our visits to people, places and archives from Cornwall to Northumberland.

I am indebted to the Wellcome Trust for funding this study during an eight-month sabbatical from clinical work as an old age psychiatrist. I am also grateful to Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust for allowing me to take time off and to Lynis Lewis and North Central London Research Network for help with administrative matters.

My link to Palgrave Macmillan began with a chance meeting with historian John Stewart at a conference at the Wellcome Trust. He introduced me to Matthew Smith and Catharine Coleborne, academic editors of the series *Mental Health in Historical Perspective*. They were endlessly enthusiastic and guided me through many stages towards publication. I'm also grateful to Vicky Long who reviewed the manuscript and whose comments helped shape the book, and to Palgrave's editors, Molly Beck, Oliver Dyer and Sundar Ananthapadmanabhan, who were a pleasure to work with.

This list of helpers, encouragers and friends is not exhaustive, and I apologise to anyone missed out who thinks they should have been included. To them too I am most grateful.