

William Siegfried Dawson: a pioneering Australasian psychiatrist

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this paper was to consider the life and contribution of Professor William Siegfried Dawson (1891–1975) by examination of school, university and hospital reports and journal articles.

Conclusions: Professor Dawson made a major contribution, through his academic and professional roles and leadership, to the firm establishment of psychiatry, psychiatric scholarship and psychiatric organisations in Australia.

Keywords: Australasian Association of Psychiatrists, history, psychiatry, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, WS Dawson

William Siegfried Dawson (Figure 1) was born on 27 April 1891, in Skipton, Yorkshire, UK. His father, William Harbutt Dawson, was successively a journalist, civil servant, scholar of German social policy, author and a member of the British delegation to the Versailles Peace negotiations after World War 1. (William Siegfried) Dawson's mother, Anna Clara Augusta née Gruetz, originated from the Duchy of Luxemburg, Germany.¹

Dawson successively attended Skipton Grammar School (1898–1903), Sedbergh School (1903–1907) and Dulwich College. At Sedbergh School, the school magazine of February 1905 mentions Dawson participating in a singing quartet at the recent Christmas concert, and the same is said again in 1906, indicating an interest in musical activities which persisted throughout life. In 1906, he went to Alum Bay, Isle of Wight, on a geological expedition, and donated sand from the bay to Sedbergh School (Kay Iliffe, personal communication, 2012).

On 14 October 1910, Dawson was accepted into Trinity College, Oxford, as a commoner (i.e. fee paying rather than a scholar of the College). He rowed as number seven in the Second Torpid of 1912, one of the races preparing for the main boat races in June. He passed organic chemistry in 1912, and obtained his Bachelor of Arts in physiology in Trinity Term in 1914. It is surprising that no college group photograph exists of him, as one was taken every summer, but one does exist of him in the Boat Club album. He was invited by Sir William Osler to dinner on 6 February 1914, an invitation that was found inserted in Cushing's *Life of Sir William Osler*, a book he

donated to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians in May 1966. Specific details of the meeting or dinner are unknown and not mentioned in previous compilations^{2,3} but Dawson may have been seeking advice about hospital appointments and future professional directions. He joined the Oxford University Officer Training Corps on 4 August 1914, passed his clinical subjects (second Bachelor of Medicine) in July 1916, whilst a student at St Thomas's Hospital, and was then appointed Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was sent to East Africa and Egypt (1916–1919) where he caught filariasis which troubled him for the remainder of his life.

Upon his return from the army, Dawson was appointed resident house physician at St Thomas's Hospital in February 1920, and whilst there obtained the Member of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) in 1920 and the Diploma of Psychological Medicine (DPM) in 1921. He then had brief appointments at the mental asylum at Hanwell and Claybury Mental Hospital in preparation for a career in psychiatry.

Maudsley Hospital period

Dawson was an original appointee to the Maudsley Hospital which opened in January 1923.⁴ He was third in the medical hierarchy, after its Director, Dr Edward

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Figure 1. Professor William Siegfried Dawson (1891–1975).

Mapother (1881–1940),⁵ and Deputy Superintendent, Dr Alfred Alexander Webster Petrie (1884–1962). Dawson was lucky to work under these two psychiatrists, as they had drive and vision for the specialty which was hitherto lacking in Britain. The hospital admitted voluntary patients only and had research, teaching and outpatient facilities.⁴ Dawson headed the department of child psychiatry, the history of which is described elsewhere (though his initials are incorrectly printed).⁶ In February 1923, he submitted his thesis to the University of Oxford and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine (DM). The annual report of the superintendent for the year ending 31 January 1924 states ‘the responsibilities of Drs Petrie and Dawson are particularly heavy’. By 1924, the workload of the hospital had increased, with 1000 outpatients and 500 voluntary in-patients seen. Dawson was now conducting clinical lectures on Tuesday afternoons ‘on physical causes and accompaniments of mental disorders’.⁷ Later that year, Dawson joined the Regular Army Reserve of Officers⁸ and acquired sufficient knowledge, experience and teaching to write his book, *Aids to psychiatry*,⁹ within three years of starting his specialty. The *British Medical Journal* reviewed it thus: ‘the book includes in a small compass the subject-matter of the ordinary textbook, and it is thoroughly up to date ... is readable and written with commendable clearness’.¹⁰

Dr Mapother’s report for the year ending 31 January 1925 mentions the hard work of Dr Petrie and Dr Dawson in the male and female wards and their large amount of teaching. The report makes special mention of Dawson’s research on ‘The use of tryparsamide in neurosyphilis’ and ‘A study of cases of cerebral tumour with predominant mental symptoms’ (Colin S. Gale, archivist of the Bethlem Royal Hospital, personal communication, 2011). His academic career had started. By July of that year, Dr Mapother

managed to obtain a Rockefeller Medical Fellowship for Dawson (in the same year that the famous Australian, Dr Howard William Florey, obtained his fellowship), to study child psychiatry and examine the teaching of psychiatry among the major medical schools in the USA. Mapother was keen to build a strong teaching and research base for the Maudsley Hospital (though he initially disapproved of the teaching of psychiatry to undergraduates) and fought hard to obtain money from the Rockefeller Foundation for fellowships, research and buildings.¹¹

Dawson visited Chicago, Colorado, Columbia, Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities: in the last-named, he attended the Phipps Clinic and was influenced by its director, Dr Adolf Meyer (1866–1950) and his ‘psychobiological’ approach.¹¹ Dawson learned about the ‘mental hygiene’ movement and its application to society,⁶ and his report¹² stressed the teaching of over 60 hours of psychiatry to undergraduates, encouraging students to examine individual patients and to understand the patient’s personality and his/her reaction to coping with medical and psychiatric illness. He also advised teaching psychiatry along medical lines which would help the general practitioner in his subsequent practice.¹²

Upon his return to London, Dawson continued his lectures on mental symptoms and their genesis¹³ on Friday afternoons. He won the Gaskell Gold Medal and the bronze medal and prize of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association in 1926, just prior to his appointment in Sydney.¹⁴

Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Sydney

Before coming to Australia, Dawson married Gladys Lyle Paton at St Matthew’s Church, Denmark Hill, UK on 29 January 1927, and he took up his appointment in Sydney in March of that year. By all accounts the couple were happily married but childless and his wife predeceased him.

The Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Sydney was instigated by Dr Eric Sinclair (1860–1925), a Glaswegian who became the Inspector General of the Insane in New South Wales in 1898. The first professor was Sir John McPherson (1857–1942), then aged 65 years, and he held the Chair from 1922–1926.¹⁵

On 7 December 1926, the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced Dawson’s appointment to the University of Sydney and quoted his main referee, Professor Adolph Meyer (of Johns Hopkins University), who described him as ‘a man with an unusual record of good training and personal output of work. The author of an excellent summary of the essentials of psychiatric teaching, and a man of wide experience.’ An announcement of the appointment was also made in the American press.¹⁶

The 1926 Senior Year Book of the University of Sydney referred to Dawson as ‘a languid, heavily degreed young-looking man from Oxford’.¹⁷ The academic appointment

included responsibilities at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Broughton Hall, and in 1928 Dawson became an honorary advisor to the Australian Institute of Industrial Psychology. He gave 20 lectures to students during the long vacation, gave Saturday morning demonstrations of patients at Callan Park/Broughton Hall, and gave students a written examination in their fifth year. He is described as 'a fluent but prosaic' lecturer, but an excellent demonstrator of clinical signs and he had the charisma of 'of an experienced showman'. He was good in demonstrating neurotic patients and was a 'skilled hypnotist'.¹⁸ One student remembered him as 'a tall English figure with an appropriate accent' (the late Dr Harris Greenberg, personal communication, 2011). Though reserved, Dawson could open up when involved with music, English literature (Shakespeare) and photography.

In 1931, Dawson was a speaker at the inaugural Victorian Council for Mental Hygiene, and examined the causes of mental illness, looking at 'misfits', diagnosing mental illness early and calling for greater cooperation between educationists, social workers and doctors. Dawson stressed the importance of reaching out to patients before they needed to be certified insane and admitted to hospital. He stressed that 'this is an age of prevention', a prophetic vision of de-institutionalisation of patients and community psychiatry of modern times.¹⁹ In May 1933, Dawson was elected as a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London and five years later became a foundation Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians,¹⁸ to whom he gave some of his books before he left Australia.

In 1934, there was disagreement with the University of Sydney over private practice and Dawson had to withdraw from his appointment. However, the university created a new post of lecturer, to which he was appointed and he was thus able to continue his private practice. The university changed its attitude in 1937, and Dawson was re-appointed as professor for seven years, an appointment which was renewed in 1944 and continued until 1951 when he retired.

During World War 2, Dawson enlisted with the Australian Forces (on 25 August 1941), as lieutenant-colonel and consultant psychiatrist, in spite of his filariasis, either hiding it or passing a perfunctory examination. He was sent to Palestine, where he directed the neurosis unit at Kfar Vitkin on the northern coast of Palestine. The unit was beset with problems of alcoholism and gambling, which were a bad influence on patients in other wards. Dawson is quoted to have said that most of the improvements with psychotherapy were made because 'the patient is or soon will be downgraded so that he is removed from the stresses and situations he fears, or feels unable to face'.²⁰ He was invalided back to Australia in June 1942 because of 'phlebitis in his right leg' (which may have been his filariasis), and went to the Concord Repatriation General Hospital (CRGH), Sydney, which was then the 113 Australian General Hospital. On 14 January 1954, in the year of the Royal Visit to Australia,

he requested that he receive any medals to which he was entitled in relation to his service during World War 2. He was notified on the 25 February 1954 that he was entitled to receive three medals (for Defence, War and Australia Service) but was warned that there would be a delay due to the unusually large number of requests.

One of Dawson's final contributions to Australian psychiatry, before he left, was to write its history in New South Wales from 1850 to 1900.¹⁵ He used records in the Mitchell Library in New South Wales, Australia, and reports of the Colonial Secretary's Department and the Lunacy Department. He described disagreements between various superintendents, often aired in public by writing letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and listed the various recreational facilities available to the inmates in 1863 at the Tarban Creek Asylum (later Gladesville Psychiatry Hospital) such as skittles, bagatelle, backgammon, cards, cribbage and a library. Dawson reported that, according to Dr Francis Campbell (1798–1877), the incidence of insanity in the colony was 1 in 400 in 1863. Dr Campbell also recommended roasting coffee twice daily as a good way of disinfecting wards. Dawson reported that Dr Richard Greenup (1803–1866), Superintendent of the Parramatta Asylum, was stabbed to death by a patient in 1866. Dawson also mentioned that the first MD in Psychological Medicine from the University of Sydney was given to Dr James Froude Flashman (1870–1917) in 1897.

Contribution to the Australasian Association of Psychiatrists (AAP)

The idea of forming a society of psychiatrists arose shortly after World War 2 between friends who had known each other in the army. In February 1946, Dr Henry Fitzgerald Maudsley (1891–1962) visited Dr Desmond William Holme Arnott (1902–1982) at CRGH and suggested the formation of the AAP. The initial idea was for the association to be for psychiatrists in private practice only but Arnott pointed out that most psychiatrists were actually in mental hospitals. Those two psychiatrists decided to contact Dawson, who was then the only Professor of Psychiatry in Australia and New Zealand, and to initiate proceedings towards the establishment of this association. Maudsley then visited Dawson at his home in Rose Bay on 4 May 1946 with the above proposal and Dawson moved quickly to send a letter to psychiatrists two days later. Twenty-seven psychiatrists (including John Frederick Joseph Cade (1912–1980)) met at the premises of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in Melbourne on 9 October 1946 where Maudsley spoke first about setting up the association and, after the election of Dawson as chairman, handed the chair to him. Dawson thus became foundation president of the association. (There is some evidence that discussions about such an association were held in the 1930s between Dr John Bostock (1892–1987) and Dawson but nothing came of them.) It was Maudsley

who suggested to Dawson the title of the inaugural, presidential address, 'The teaching of psychiatry in the medical schools of Australia'. Dawson was surprised but honoured, and accepted the invitation.²¹

The first address to the AAP took place on 16 October 1946 in Melbourne.²² In it, Dawson traced the history of psychiatric education in England and Australia from 1827, when Dr John Conolly (1794–1866) was stopped by the Royal College of Physicians from lecturing to students in psychiatry, and praised the University of Sydney for taking the lead in Australia and appointing Dr Frederick Norton Manning (1839–1903) as lecturer in mental disorders in 1886. Dawson quoted his mentor, Sir William Osler, three times and mentioned Hughlings Jackson's hierarchical organisation of the brain and its application to the mind, 'when passion rises up, reason is driven out'. Dawson was ahead of his peers when he referred to chemical restraints and 'protecting the patient from himself and society from the patient'. He also advocated the creation of psychiatric units in general hospitals and praised those already established overseas. He ended his address by laying out a framework of undergraduate psychiatric teaching. He was in favour of examinations and finished on a whimsical note by quoting students' answers to exam questions, one of which was 'the outlook as regards treatment was bad, while the prognosis was good'.

In early 1948, Dawson wrote to the secretary of the AAP, Dr Alex Smith, informing him that Sir Sydney Evan Jones (1887–1948), the first superintendent of Broughton Hall Psychiatric Clinic, was dying and asking that an appeal be made with a view to creating a prize in his memory. The money was initially invested but, in 1952, it was decided to award it as a prize to the most meritorious publication by an Australian or New Zealander.²¹

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) had a strange conception. The impetus was the inability to register the DPM in Queensland in 1962, which prompted discussions about the formation of a College. A subcommittee was formed, comprising Dr John (Jack) Donald Russell (1903–1994), Professor David Clarkson Maddison (1927–1981), Dr Ian Gordon Simpson (1919–1976) and Dr Bruce Henry Peterson (b. 1918). This led to the official incorporation of the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (ANZCP) in Sydney on 28 October 1963 and Dawson became a foundation Fellow. 'Royal' was added to the name of the College in 1978. The College headquarters was established in Melbourne in May 1965, in a building owned by the state government, and in 1983 the College acquired its own premises. Both buildings were called 'Maudsley House', with the main meeting room in both being named 'The Dawson Room'.²¹

Dawson was a reserved man (perhaps shy because he was tall), fond of classical music, English literature (especially Shakespeare) and photography. His obituarist¹⁴ described him as a 'basically simple and humble man',

who bore with fortitude his increasing deafness and blindness as well as his long-standing filariasis. Dawson left Australia in 1964, after his wife's death, to live with his half-sister Mary and then with his other half-sister, Margaret May Louise Dawson, who was an occupational therapist at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. Dawson died on 13 March 1975.

Contributions to psychiatry

Dawson arrived in Sydney with an academic reputation, as the author of books and scientific articles. His books^{9,23} went through many editions, which met a need in the market and an obvious satisfaction with his readers. He was also recognised as a reformer of teaching of both undergraduates and postgraduates, having written about psychiatry courses both in England and Australia.^{12,22} For a time, he was the only Professor of Psychiatry in Australia and New Zealand, and consequently he was looked upon for leadership in the field. He was quick to see the need for a corporate body of psychiatrists. He acted speedily to set that up and was honoured with its first presidency. When the association became the RANZCP, he was honoured by the naming of the main meeting room of the College Headquarters after him.

There is no better fitting conclusion than to quote his obituarist, who ended by writing that Dawson 'merited his second name, Siegfried, the mediaeval hero in the German epic. Literally, Siegfried means Victory and Peace'.¹⁴

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Disclosure

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