

**Increase of lunacy : and special reasons applicable to Ireland / by Edward D. O'Neill, Medical Superintendent, Limerick District Lunatic Asylum.**

**Contributors**

O'Neill, Edward D.  
Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library

**Publication/Creation**

Limerick : George McKern & Sons, Limited, 1903.

**Persistent URL**

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/a439yfe8>

**License and attribution**

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by the Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library at Yale University, through the Medical Heritage Library. The original may be consulted at the Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library at Yale University. where the originals may be consulted.

This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection  
183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE UK  
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
E [library@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

*With the Writer's Compliments*

INCREASE OF LUNACY

AND

SPECIAL REASONS APPLICABLE

TO IRELAND

BY

EDWARD D. O'NEILL,

MEDICAL SUPERINTENDENT,

LIMERICK DISTRICT LUNATIC ASYLUM

READ AT CONFERENCE OF ASYLUM COMMITTEES

DUBLIN, NOVEMBER 25th & 26th, 1903

YALE  
MEDICAL LIBRARY



HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY

# INCREASE OF LUNACY

AND

SPECIAL REASONS APPLICABLE

TO IRELAND

BY

EDWARD D. O'NEILL,

MEDICAL SUPERINTENDENT,

LIMERICK DISTRICT LUNATIC ASYLUM

READ AT CONFERENCE OF ASYLUM COMMITTEES

DUBLIN, NOVEMBER 25th & 26th, 1903

Limerick

GEORGE MCKERN & SONS, LIMITED, PRINTERS AND PUBLISHERS  
113 George Street.

1903.



Hist  
RE 450  
I 74  
065  
1000

## INCREASE OF LUNACY AND SPECIAL REASONS APPLICABLE TO IRELAND.

---

In approaching the subject of the increase of insanity in Ireland the writer realizes the difficulties that have to be encountered in obtaining satisfactory information as to the causes of the increase, owing (1) to the meagre and unsatisfactory returns afforded by Asylum Records, and (2) the insufficient description derivable from the admission forms.

I take it that this Conference has been convened for the purpose of eliciting information and discussing the several matters connected with the management of the insane, and also the fiscal administration of Asylums.

I do not purpose taking up the time of this representative Conference by going very minutely into the question, which would mean the putting before you of elaborate statistical tables; nor do I intend to propound any new theories as regards the increase of insanity. My object is rather to focus opinion on the preponderant influences that go such a long way in helping to swell the insane population in this country, and to suggest how this evil may be best grappled with by preventive means.

The subject has received much attention of late years. Two very able papers were read on it, one by the late Dr. Hack Tuke, the other by Dr. Drapes, Enniscorthy Asylum, at the Annual Meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association, Dublin, 1894. In 1893 the Executive called on the Inspectors of Lunatics for a Special Report on "the alleged increase of insanity in Ireland." The Inspectors requested the different Superintendents to furnish them with the fullest information obtainable. These reports, and the Inspectors' conclusions arrived at, were published in the Forty-third Report of the Inspectors (Ireland) 1894.

In dealing with this question the first thing to strike the observer is, that notwithstanding a yearly decreasing population, insanity should be on the increase. That the increase is not conjectural is proved by concrete facts. Let us start from the year 1881, when the population was 5,174,836 and the number of lunatics under care, 13,326. In 1891 the population was 4,714,750 and the number of lunatics 16,688. In 1901 the population was 4,458,775 and the number of lunatics 21,630. Again, in 1880 the number of insane *under treatment* was 250 per 100,000 of the population, whereas, in 1902 the figures reached the appalling total of 499, or an increase of 100 per cent. During the year 1902 the proportion in England was

1 in 310. In 1851 the total number of lunatics and idiots at large, in Asylums, Prisons, and Workhouses amounted to 9,980, in 1901 the figures amounted to 25,050. It is conceded that the only true criterion of the increase or decrease of insanity is to be found in the number of first admissions, which in 1880 amounted to 1,925, as against 3,173 during last year, or an increase of 65 per cent., notwithstanding the great decrease in the population.

I do not think I am far wrong in fixing the date and initial cause of the increase of insanity to the darkest period in the History of Ireland—the famine years of 1846-7. \* Wright says—“The winter of 1846-7, passed with a terrible demonstration of the amount of mental and physical suffering in Ireland which human nature can endure without absolute annihilation. Gaunt famine stalked through the land, her skeleton hands everywhere strewing misery and death on the suffering race, whilst fever and pestilence waited closely on her steps, and the whole land was scoured by heart-killing desolation and hopelessness.” This vivid description shows the deplorable condition to which the people were reduced. Is it to be wondered at that the stamina of the peasantry was affected, with the inevitable result of mental and physical degeneratiou? Besides, the tide of emigration was setting in, and from

\* Wright's History of Ireland. Vol. 3, p. 559.



the effects of these causes the country has never recovered. A large proportion of the insane population of to-day are, to a great extent, the direct, or indirect victims of causes incidental to that period.

Having thus briefly referred to the increase of insanity, I desire briefly to touch on the causes that are specially applicable to Ireland, and to deal with them in the following order. (1) Accumulation. (2) Emigration and Agricultural depression. (3) Intemperance and Dietary. (4) Masturbation, and (5) Heredity, the commonest cause of insanity, though perhaps not more specially applicable to Ireland than to any other country from which statistics are available.

Accumulation must be regarded as primarily responsible for the increase in the number of insane under treatment; this is explained by the preponderance of each year's admissions over the discharges and deaths, consequent on low discharge and death rates. The admissions for the twenty years ending 31st December, 1902, amount to 63,311, the discharges 34,872, and the deaths 19,976, showing an actual increase of 9,463 patients.

It is not easy to account for the low recovery rate unless it is due to the change in the form of insanity which has taken place in recent years. Formerly the greater number of the admissions were suffering from Acute Mania,

characterised by the suddenness of the attack with delirium, violence, and usually, rapid recovery. Now the attack comes on slowly, the lunatic is melancholic, silent, depressed, and the recovery is either very slow or doubtful. Besides, the physical condition is generally very much impaired, and this greatly retards recovery. The death rate is low, and only for the close existing connection between insanity and consumption (which is the most frequent cause of Asylum mortality) the percentage would be much lower. Since 1890 up to the 31st December, 1902, no fewer than 3,885 inmates of Irish Asylums died from this cause, which is far more frequent in Ireland than in England or Scotland, though in 1864 Ireland had the lowest rate. The ordinary death rate in English Asylums for last year was 10·55 per cent. on the daily average number resident as against 7·5 in Irish Asylums, or 41 per cent. higher. Asylums are much more in favour with the people than formerly and they are not so reluctant in sending in their relatives for treatment in preference to keeping them at home. Years ago each village had a number of harmless lunatics or idiots roaming about, who are now segregated in Asylums and Workhouses, which has materially tended to accumulation. With reference to the increase due to accumulation the following figures giving the age distribution of the lunatics re-

sident in Asylums in 1871, 1881, 1891, and 1901, will show that there has been a large progressive increase in the inmates of 45 years and upwards, while there has been a corresponding decrease in the younger ages :—

	per thousand under 45	...	...	per thousand over 45
1871	678	...	...	322
1881	636	...	...	364
1891	580	...	...	420
1901	556	...	..	444

Emigration and Agricultural Depression are, undoubtedly, special reasons for the increase of insanity to a marked degree; and the reason of this is very plain when we consider that from the year 1853 to the 31st March, 1901, the startling number of 3,846,393 emigrants left the country, of whom four-fifths were young people between the ages of 15 and 35. Thus the country has been drained of its manhood; and having regard to this fact, I do not think that sufficient attention has been given to the tendency to the depreciation both of the physical and mental condition of the old people remaining. They had to depend on the land without assistance to work it, and in the face of wet and bad seasons, broke down physically and mentally, and ultimately drifted into Asylums and Workhouses. Importance must also be attributed to the agricultural depression that followed in the track of Emi-

gration—the inability to make ends meet—the want of nutritious food, and the necessarily accompanying worry, wore the people down. Concurrently with emigration and the depression that existed in Ireland for so many years, must also be taken the state of the political atmosphere. In connection with the land agitation there was a high pitch of excitement, which gave rise to considerable mental unrest. Ireland is an agricultural country with little or no industries or manufactures to provide employment for the bulk of the people who must, and do, live by agricultural labour. The recent Land Act augurs well for the future, and must, assuredly, tend to the keeping of our young peasantry at home. Speaking on the subject of Emigration recently, Mr. John Redmond, M.P., stated—“That the poorest agricultural labourer, living in the meanest hovel in Kerry, was better off, was healthier, was happier than the majority of Irish workmen in America.” This opinion, coming from such an authority, with his intimate knowledge of the condition of the Irish, must have great weight in opening the eyes of the people to the disadvantages of Emigration.

The excessive use of Alcohol is another cause in helping to swell our Asylum population, of course not so much in the country as in large cities and towns. Some hold that Alcohol is not responsible for all the ills attributed to its

abuse, but it is certain that the children of habitual drunkards are very often affected by epilepsy or some neurotic disease. Of the 34,349 admissions during the past ten years, Intemperance is the assigned cause in 3,098 cases, or about 9 per cent. of the gross. In connection with the drink habit in this country there is a special feature which has been overlooked to a great extent—I refer to racial excitability, to which the abuse of alcohol adds fuel. Another peculiarity is that the habitual drunkard during his bout eats nothing he simply lives on drink. In this respect he differs from his English or Scotch brother, who is more systematic, as he generally manages to get in solids with fluids. In the trail of intemperance follows improvidence, and it must be remembered that poverty and want tend to weaken the physical powers of those whose nervous organisations are naturally impaired, thus rendering them more susceptible to mental aberration.

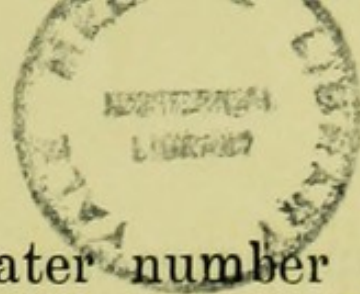
The rigid administration of the Inebriate Act should have a deterrent effect, as two years' confinement for a person, who is not a criminal, will have a better effect than the usual stereotyped magisterial decision "a month, or forty shillings fine." Dietary is another matter of importance, and in this respect there has been a great change in recent years. Formerly the staple food of the country was porridge and

milk for breakfast, and potatoes, butter, and milk for dinner. This fare may not be very appetising, but it was wholesome, sustaining, and nutritious. Now, bread with tea is the usual dinner for the majority of the agricultural labourers. Much attention has of recent years been directed to the injurious effect of excessive tea-drinking as an indirect factor in inducing insanity. No doubt it is true that this decoction, which is often left stewing for hours, is largely partaken of by the poor must be injurious in tending to produce dyspepsia and nervousness. But that it is a factor to the extent described requires fuller and more authentic confirmation. If the excessive use of tea is so injurious, what is to be said about the cigarette craze that has caught on to the children of to-day? In the streets are to be daily seen children of tender years smoking poisonous cigarettes which are sold at five a penny. Surely they are laying up for themselves the seeds for future development of nervous diseases. The law should prohibit the sale of cigarettes to young children in the same manner as the sale of drink is being restricted.

Masturbation—I regret to say—is another fruitful source of insanity. Of late years, this baneful habit has become very common, and amongst its victims are the young, middle-aged and elderly. By some it is held to be only an effect, but I hold that in a large number of

cases it is the cause of insanity. On this point I must not be mistaken, as the habit is a complication in nearly all forms of insanity. It is a prevalent custom with boys at school—the result of example—and with adults, perhaps owing to the fact that our agricultural population do not marry at as early an age as the same class in England and other countries. Unfortunately, our marriage rate seems to be decreasing each year, and is by far the lowest in Europe, being 5.18 per 1,000, or less than one-third the English rate. In consultation, I meet with a number of these cases, which, I am sure, is also the experience of other Superintendents. Reference to the statistics dealing with the insane of any country, discloses the fact that Heredity largely preponderates over all other existing causes. If we consider what Heredity means the reason is obvious. It is the transmission of peculiarities of form, mental character, manner, habits, and proclivity to disease or otherwise—in a word, it is the tendency of like to beget like. The paternal or maternal taint is transmitted to the offspring year in and year out, with the result that one-fourth of the insane population of the world are victims of this cause. Griesinger (1) says—“Statistical investigations strengthen very remarkably the opinion generally held by

(1) Mental Pathology and Therapeutics (Sydenham Society Translations).



Physicians that in the greater number cases of insanity an Heredity predisposition lies at the bottom of the malady." Luys (2) says—  
“Heredity governs all the phenomena of mental pathology with the same results and the same energy as we see it control moral and physical resemblances in the offspring.”

Of the 3,947 admissions last year 961 were attributed to this cause. Consanguinity has an important bearing on heredity to which I would wish to call attention. In the early ages blood marriages were very common with the Medes, Tartars, Persians and Egyptians, who not only married their sisters, but their daughters and their mothers. In the twentieth century marriage of the children of brothers and sisters to the children of brothers and sisters is almost as unnatural. The offspring of such marriages are generally tainted either mentally or physically. Stock-breeders will not allow of inbreeding amongst cattle, yet with human beings the law permits the marriage of cousins! In America each state appears to make its own laws as regards marriage. In New York an uncle may marry his niece, or an aunt her nephew; in Kentucky the marriage of cousins is forbidden. Insane, Epileptic, and Neurotic people are allowed to marry. This unnatural procedure will continue until Legis-

(2) *Traite clinique et pratique des Maladies Mentales*, Paris  
1881, p. 214



