

Letter addressed to the editor of the Fifeshire Journal, on the cottage treatment of pauper lunatics. 22d. October 1870 / A. W. Wemyss.

Contributors

Wemyss, Alexander Watson.
Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

Publication/Creation

Fife : [publisher not identified], 1870.

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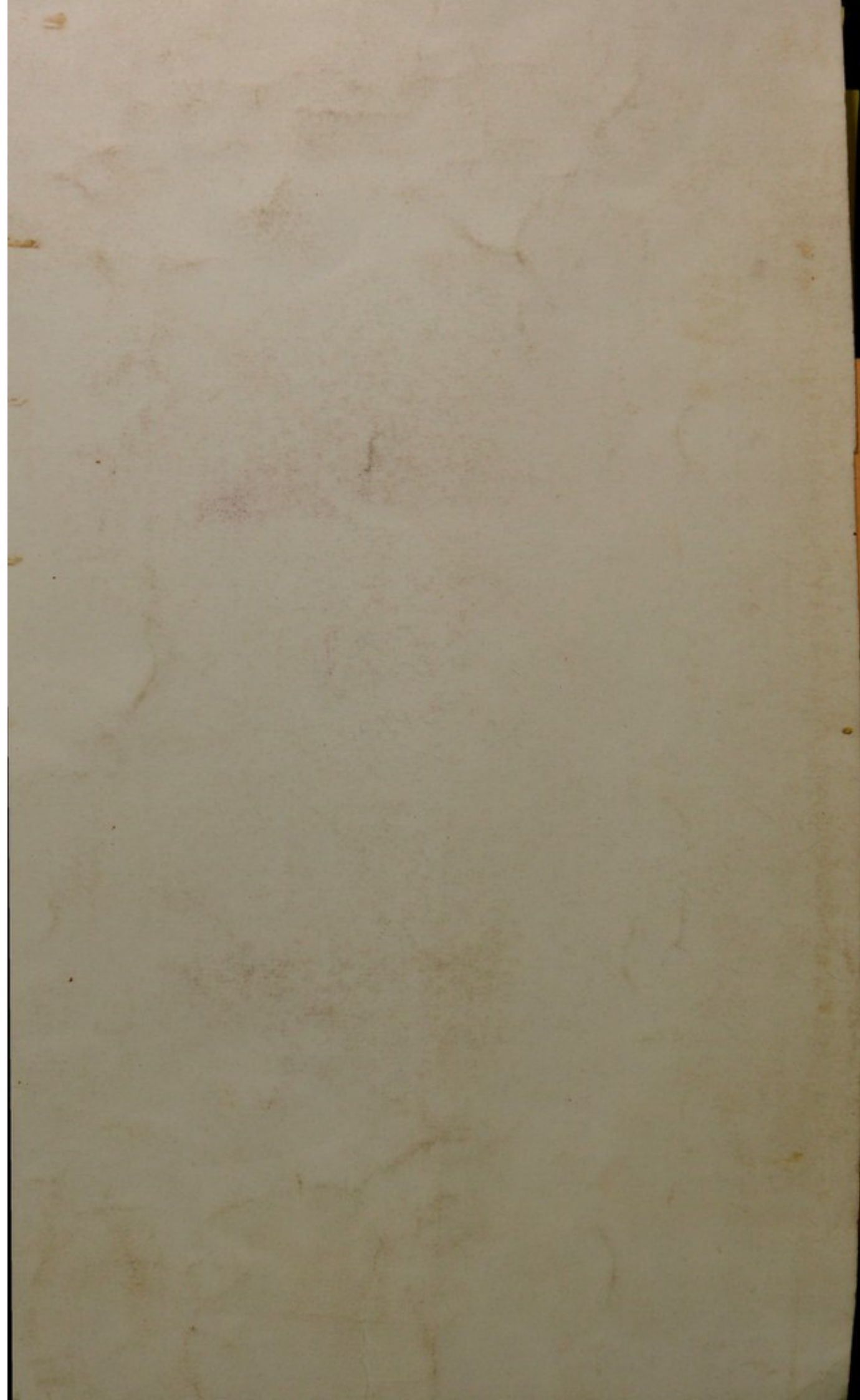
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LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE
FIFESHIRE JOURNAL

ON THE

COTTAGE TREATMENT OF PAUPER LUNATICS.

22d OCTOBER 1870.

SIR,—As I observe that you have directed public attention in a particular manner to this subject, by a leading article in your journal of 29th September last, suggested by the annual report of the Superintendent of the District Asylum, published in your journal on 22d September; and, as I conceive, there is very general misconception upon many points in regard to this matter, I beg leave, through your columns, to make a few remarks on the subject. This discussion has arisen from statements in the report alluded to, to the effect there are cases of chronic, incurable, and harmless pauper-lunatics in the District Asylum, which ought to be removed and boarded out in cottages of some of the villagers in the county, to go at large, but under the supervision of the District Board and the medical officers of the District Asylum. But, it is also added, that there exists no power to carry this into effect.

Now, this question has been discussed over and over again. No one disputes that there are many cases of such unfortunate individuals who do not require asylum treatment, and who are better

situated in private houses of friends or others. And so practically in this district many of the pauper-lunatics are thus placed: for there are about 290 in the district, of whom 244 are in the Asylum, and almost all the others are in private houses. Keeping pauper-lunatics in poorhouses is now, very properly, almost entirely discontinued. The question before us, therefore, now is, not the propriety or expediency of cottage treatment, but the PROPER SELECTION of the cases suitable for being boarded out in private houses under the care of friends or others. This subject should be considered in a broad general manner, and at the outset several important circumstances kept in view—1st, That district asylums for pauper-lunatics are of a *mixed character*, intended for the care of chronic incurable cases as well as others; 2d, That these institutions possess the necessary requirements combined of being curative hospitals, poorhouses, and houses of confinement for safety; 3d, That while the Lunacy Acts provide for the proper care and treatment of all classes of the insane, they provide also that none shall be either improperly discharged from, or detained in, asylums; 4th, That district asylums for pauper-lunatics have been instituted mainly because of the cruel and improper treatment to which many of these individuals were subjected in private houses.

In order to understand the wise and important provisions now made law, I shall here quote shortly the sections of the Lunacy Acts by which they may be carried into effect:—1. By the General Lunacy Act 1857, sects. 95 and 112; Amended Act 1862, sect. 18; and Amended Act 1866, sect. 10, all pauper-lunatics have to be sent to the district asylum, unless allowed to be disposed of otherwise by an order of the General Board. Under this Act they may be provided for “in such other manner, and under such regulations, as to inspection and otherwise, as shall be sanctioned by

the Board." 2. By the Act 1862, sect. 16, and Act 1866, sects. 8, 9, and 11, on the application of the Inspector of a Parochial Board a pauper-lunatic may, by an order from the General Board, be removed or transferred from an asylum to any other house or asylum without any order from the Sheriff. And the like authority may be obtained for his liberation on trial or probation under such regulations and inspection as the Board shall direct, provided his removal will not be injurious to the lunatic or dangerous to the public. 3. By the Act 1862, sect. 17, when it shall appear to the Superintendent of any asylum in which a pauper-lunatic is detained that he has so far recovered that he may be safely liberated without risk or injury to the public or himself, such Superintendent shall transmit a certificate to that effect to the Inspector of the Parochial Board at whose expense he is maintained, and on his failure within fourteen days to remove such lunatic, the Superintendent shall intimate the case to the General Board, who may direct inquiry into the circumstances, and if satisfied "that the lunatic has recovered, or that he may be safely liberated without risk or injury to the public or himself, the Board may order his discharge forthwith." 4. By Act 1866, sect. 13, a pauper-lunatic may be received or kept in a private house by application of the Inspector of the Poor to the General Board for their order or sanction. And in such case the Sheriff may grant his order on one medical certificate. But the lunatic may be so received and kept for a temporary residence not exceeding six months under a medical certificate without infringement of the law. 5. While provision is made by the Lunacy Acts to prevent the improper detention of lunatics in asylums or other houses (see Act 1866, sects. 13 and 14), no lunatic can be detained in an asylum for more than three years without a certificate on soul and conscience by the Medical Superintendent, that

the detention of such lunatic "is necessary and proper either for his own welfare or the safety of the public." (See Act 1866, sect. 7). 6. By the General Lunacy Act 1857, sect. 70, provision is made for the appointment of inspectors by the District Boards, by whom all lunatics in the district, both in asylums and in private houses, are to be inspected. The duties of such inspectors, in terms of the Act, are, "to visit the public, private, and district asylums and houses in terms of this Act, within their respective districts, at all such times as they shall be called upon so to do by the District Board, or the Board, or the Sheriff, and otherwise in terms of this Act; and upon all such visitations of asylums they shall enter in a book to be kept in each such asylum, to be called the "Patients' Book," the condition of the asylum, and the general state of the health, mental and bodily, of the lunatics kept therein, and also the particulars of any case requiring remark: Provided always, that where in any district more than one district inspector shall be appointed, it shall not be necessary that more than one of such inspectors shall be a medical person." The appointment of these inspectors is evidently intended as a salutary check upon the conduct of all having care of the insane, whether medical or others. But, as yet, this has been only partially carried into effect.

From the above statements, it must appear obvious that ample provision is made under the Lunacy Acts, not only to secure the proper care of pauper lunatics in asylums, but also (if so desired) for their removal and being kept in private houses, or cottages, under proper medical inspection. But in order that they may not be improperly removed by the arbitrary, or capricious, or interested conduct of any party, certain checks are imposed for the protection of such patients and their guardians. So that individuals who are unfit for being discharged, or for being removed to private houses

and allowed to go at large, cannot be so removed without proper certification and the sanction of the General Board of Lunacy.

For the removal of pauper patients from a District Asylum, the initiative may be taken, either by the superintendent of the asylum, or by the inspector of the Parochial Board at whose instance they have been there placed. If cured, they may be discharged; but, if not, they may be removed to another asylum or licensed house, provided their removal is consistent with their own welfare and the safety of the public. They may also be allowed to go out on probation under certain regulations. When patients are removed from a district asylum, the District Board has no more charge or power over them. But it has been suggested that District Boards should get power "*to seek for and supervise suitable provision for chronic lunatics on the boarding-out system.*" Such a proposal amounts to this, in the case of the District of Fife and Kinross, that after having built a large, sufficient, and costly Asylum for the care of chronic lunatics, as well as others, in the District, and engaged the services of a staff of highly paid officials, the DISTRICT BOARD should get powers to board out the chronic lunatics in cottages, under the care of such of the peasantry as would take them in charge. Thus, in the *first* instance, usurping the duty of Parochial Inspectors, in finding proper places for the disposal of the persons under their charge; *secondly*, going back to the very objectionable system tending to the ill-usage of pauper lunatics by friends and others, which mainly caused the laws which have lately been made, for establishing the now existing efficient, humane, and charitable system; and *thirdly*, imposing additional duties and responsibilities on the District Boards, which few would desire or would willingly undertake. We are not informed what number from a mixed asylum would be so boarded out; but as only nine patients out of 244 confined

in this District Asylum were lately reported as under medical treatment, it may be assumed that all the others are "chronic lunatics." But it is further proposed that, when boarded out, the patients should be under the supervision of the medical officers of the Asylum. These officials, be it remembered, have high salaries from the public to secure their whole and undivided services and attention to the duties and management of the Asylum. Would it not, therefore, be impolitic, if not a complete infatuation, for the District Board either to appoint, or allow, their servants to be occupied with indefinite duties, at indefinite distances, and altogether apart from the Asylum? The great absurdity of such a proposal is so obvious, that it is very surprising that it should ever have been made; for certainly one of the first duties of the District Board is to see that the officials are diligent, constant, and regular in the discharge of their duties in the asylum, and not to allow them to be absent from it. Besides, all local inspections as to lunatics are carried on at present by the officials of the General Board. I have only to add that the example of numerous lunatics boarded among the peasantry of the village of Gheel has been before this country for many years, but has not found much favour; because the cases there sent are selected cases suitable for such treatment; and, as I had occasion to remark in 1861, while *we* were talking of imitating their cottage treatment, *they* found it necessary to adopt our Asylum system, which, to a certain extent, is now in operation there.

To remove "chronic lunatics" from an asylum because they are "incurable and harmless" would, in many cases, be cruel and hurtful to their "welfare." For they may be old and infirm,—imbecile,—palsied and helpless,—of noisy or other bad habits, rendering them quite unfit for the cottage treatment aimed at, by requiring attendance

they could not afford. It was found that *friends* treated lunatics very badly in private houses,— would *strangers* use them better?

The cases selected for cottage treatment should be not only incurable and harmless, but able-bodied, capable of taking care of themselves in going about, and able to engage in some kind of work or useful occupation. But how few there are in asylums under such circumstances. And these few being most useful in an asylum, a superintendent would be unwilling to discharge them. Nevertheless, they should be discharged, if consistent with their own welfare and the safety of the public.—I am, yours, &c.,

A. W. WEMYSS, M.D.

Denbrae, St Andrews,
22d Oct. 1870.

A P P E N D I X .

General Board of Lunacy,
Edinburgh, 3d February 1869:

Messrs W. & G. Pagan,
District Lunacy Board, Cupar-Fife.

GENTLEMEN,

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 29th ult., enclosing printed excerpt minute of the District Board, regarding the last entry by the Visiting Commissioner. At a meeting of the Board held yesterday the minute was considered, and I am instructed to inform you that the course suggested in Sir James Coxe's entry has been pursued in other districts, the Asylums of which were somewhat in the same condition as that in which the District Asylum for Fife and Kinross now is. In carrying into operation Clause 9 of the Act 29 and 30 Vict., c. 51 (1866), under the authority of which such a course can be pursued, it will be seen by the District Board that the initiative rests with the Parochial Board of each parish. The best mode of procedure would be for such Parochial Boards as desire to take advantage of the provisions of the said Act, to send their own medical officer to examine carefully the lunatics whom it is proposed to remove, and to select such as from their state of convalescence, or from the stage and nature of their malady, appear to be incapable of receiving any benefit from further medical treatment, and can with safety, both to themselves and the public, be removed either to the lunatic wards of a poorhouse, or to private dwellings. Should any doubt exist to the permanence of these conditions, there is still another remedy which might be resorted to, viz., liberation on probation.—I am, gentlemen, your obedient servant,

WILLIAM J. BATT,
For the Secretary.