

The writ 'de lunatico inquirendo,' in the case of Jonathan Swift, D.D., Dean of St. Patrick's : with observations / by J.T. Banks.

Contributors

Banks, John Thomas, 1811-1908.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[Place of publication not identified] : [publisher not identified], [1863]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dpec9ewe>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. 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
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

266 174 17

THE
WRIT "DE LUNATICO INQUIRENDO,"

IN THE CASE OF

JONATHAN SWIFT, D.D.

DEAN OF ST. PATRICK'S;

WITH OBSERVATIONS.

BY

J. T. BANKS, M.D.T.C.D., M.R.I.A.,

KING'S PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE; VISITING PHYSICIAN TO THE RICHMOND
LUNATIC ASYLUM, ETC., ETC.

CHANCE lately placed in my hands the legal document which proves that, after due inquiry before commissioners appointed under the great seal, Jonathan Swift was declared to be "a person of unsound mind and memory," and placed under the protection of the Court of Chancery. The original, with the autographs of the commissioners and the jury, I had the honour to bring under the notice of the Royal Irish Academy, at a recent meeting of that learned body.

So much of doubt and uncertainty rests upon many passages in the life of Swift, that it is of great importance to add any fact, the authenticity of which is beyond all question. As a proof of the contradictory nature of some of the statements, I may mention that the mode of his death is still an unsettled point.

Lord Orrery says, "His death was easy, without the least pang or convulsion; even the rattling in his throat was scarce sufficient to give any alarm to his attendants, till some very little time before he expired." Falkner, on the contrary, asserts that "he died in very great agony; having been in strong convulsive fits for 36 hours before." Every circumstance, every event, in the life of the illustrious Dean of St. Patrick's must be fraught with interest, connected as they are with one who

was not only distinguished by the excellence of his genius, but also by the unswerving character of his patriotism.

To all who are familiar with the history of the life and labours of Swift, it is well known that many years of his life were clouded by the threatenings of impending disease; and that he himself was painfully conscious that the symptoms under which he laboured were frequently the precursors of mental aberration. The psychological physician will easily recognise, by a study of Swift's eventful history, causes which his experience informs him are potent in the production of mental alienation. The storms to which he was exposed were well calculated to prostrate a fabric which rests on so insecure and unstable a basis as the human mind. Poverty and dependence in youth, so galling to a haughty spirit such as his, disappointed hopes, blighted affections, the loss of those most cherished, with many other circumstances, combined to produce the disease, the anticipation of which had so long, like an evil spirit, haunted him, and well nigh embittered every moment of his existence.

That cerebral disease existed, and can be traced back to an early period of his life, is beyond all doubt. Few and meagre as the records are which we possess on the subject of Swift's disease, and solely derived from himself, and others even less likely to be well informed, we can have no difficulty in arriving at this conclusion.

It does not appear, as far as we have the means of ascertaining, that he inherited any predisposition to psychical disease; but we are not in possession of any accurate information regarding the mental health of his progenitors.

We know that his grandfather, who distinguished himself by his zeal and sufferings in the Royal cause during the "great rebellion," died at a good old age; and we do not hear of his having been afflicted with any mental infirmity. His father died young, before his son—who was destined to play so conspicuous a part in the busy world of politics and literature—had seen the light. It may be supposed that from his mother Swift inherited much of that extraordinary humour for which he was so remarkable. If this be so, as there is reason to believe, it is only in accordance with a fact often noticed, namely, that talent is more frequently transmitted from the mother than the father.

That the offspring not only resembles the parent in outward form and feature, but also frequently in mental endowments, we have ample proof from daily observation. No fact is more familiar to the physician, than the transmission of disease, psychical as well as physical; and the same may be affirmed

with regard to mental peculiarities. This, I believe, may be looked upon as a fact ascertained by reiterated observation; nevertheless, Mr Buckle, in his History of Civilization, has attempted to shake our well-founded faith in the transmission of hereditary talents, hereditary vices, and even of "hereditary madness." If the distinguished and eloquent author had taken the trouble of consulting the records of hospitals for the insane, or the works on mental disease, he would find himself compelled to give up his idea regarding the non-hereditary nature of mental maladies.

M. Moreau, Physician to the Bicêtre, one of the most accurate observers with whom I have ever come in contact, strongly advocates the doctrine of the transmission of psychical disease in his learned and deeply interesting work, "*La Psychologie morbide dans ses Rapports avec la Philosophie de l'Histoire ou de l'Influence des Neuropathies sur le Dynamisme Intellectuel.*" He says, "*L'hérédité est la source des neuf-dixièmes, peut-être, des maladies mentales.*" In this opinion of the hereditary nature of insanity, he only agrees with all who have studied the subject by the light of experience—Esquirol, and other French alienist physicians; and the most distinguished English psychologists, as Conolly, Bucknill, Winslow, and others.

Swift is included by Moreau in his group of men who presented symptoms of "insanity, properly so called;" and in goodly company, doubtless, is he placed; but probably not one among these aristocrats of talent was possessed of a more original mind. M. Moreau considers that diseased states of the brain powerfully favour the development of the highest intellectual functions: it would appear, according to him, that in point of fact the most exalted genius and insanity are cognate conditions. He evidently agrees in opinion with the ancient sage who says, "*Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiæ.*" Swift himself said, "Madness is the source of all human genius."

The subject is one of surpassing interest; and it must be conceded to M. Moreau, even by those who differ widely from his conclusions, that he has handled it with much ingenuity and ability.

It is not my present purpose to enter minutely into the subject of Swift's case, from a medical point of view; that has already been done by my friend Dr. Wilde, in the pages of this Journal, and well has he performed the difficult task which he assigned to himself, and that too in the absence of any record from the many physicians who ministered to the Dean.

When we remember how eminent some of the physicians

were who endeavoured to alleviate Swift's sufferings, it is a subject of much regret that they have not bequeathed to posterity one line on the subject of the disease of their illustrious patient.

Among his physicians were Sir Patrick Dun—the benevolent founder, like himself, of an hospital which bears his honoured name—and Dr. Arbuthnot, physician to Queen Anne, of both of whom he speaks in terms of affection. Of Arbuthnot he says, "He was the only man of the faculty who seemed to understand my case; but could not remedy it." Writing to Pope, he says, "The death of the Doctor (Arbuthnot) has been a terrible wound to my heart." Swift had begun to feel acutely the loss of friends, which Sir William Temple said is a "tax on long life."

Numerous as the Biographers of Swift have been, and carefully as they have sought for information from every available source, there is one passage in his life, and that the most melancholy, with which they appear to be unacquainted,—I allude to the fact of his having been made a "Chancery Lunatic." It is true, Sir Walter Scott alludes to persons having been appointed to take care of him. He says, "His estate was put under the management of trustees, and his person confided to the care of Dr. Lyons, a respectable clergyman."

Dr. Delany says, "In the beginning of the year 1741, his understanding was so much impaired, and his passion so greatly increased, that he was utterly incapable of conversation; strangers were not permitted to approach him, and his friends found it necessary to have guardians appointed of his person and estate." We shall see, by referring to the legal instrument, how incorrect Delany is as to the date. It was not until the 17th of August that the writ "*de lunatico inquirendo*" was issued; and it may be remarked, that it was returned on the 19th of the same month, although the return was not required before the 3rd of November. It is evident, then, that the biographers knew nothing of the writ, or this inaccuracy could not have occurred. It is strange, from this statement of Delany's, and from other proofs of the utter prostration of Swift's intellect, at a period long antecedent, that the jury only found him to be of unsound mind for three months prior to the date of the Commission.

That we have no record of the examination of medical men or "experts," on an inquisition which was to decide upon the mental soundness or unsoundness of a man who "did the highest honour to his country by his parts, and was a great blessing to it by the vigilance and activity of his public spirit," is matter of regret. An inquisition upon such a man

must have excited much interest, and the more strange that all the facts connected with it should not be a matter of public notoriety. But we do not find that even the long and laborious research of Mr. Weld Hartstonge obtained for his friend, Sir Walter Scott, any information on this point. It appears, also, that Scott obtained materials for his life of Swift from the Rev. Mr. Berwick, "so well known to the literary world," and from other sources likely to be in possession of authentic information.

I may mention, that Judge Berwick, son of the Rev. Mr. Berwick, to whom Sir Walter Scott expresses his obligations, is the possessor of a portrait of the Dean, which is probably the best which has ever been painted.

The petitioners for the writ *de lunatico inquirendo* were the Rev. John Grattan and the Rev. James King, both of whom were executors of the will, and to each the Dean made a bequest.

"I bequeath to Mr. John Grattan, Prebendary of Clonmethan, my silver box in which the freedom of the City of Cork was presented; in which I desire the said John to keep the tobacco he usually cheweth, called pigtail." "I bequeath to the Rev. Mr. James King, Prebendary of Tipper, my large gilded medal of King Charles the First, and on the reverse a crown of martyrdom, with other devices."

Of the Commissioners to whom the writ was directed, the first on the list is the Right Hon. Luke Gardiner.

Dr. William Cooper was Chief Examiner of the Court of Chancery.

Charles Grattan is marked on the list of Swift's friends with the letter G. All his friends were classed into grateful, ungrateful, indifferent, and doubtful.

Alderman Perceval Hunt was Sheriff of Dublin in 1718, and Lord Mayor in 1755. Alexander M'Auley was one of the executors of the will; he was Judge of the Consistory Court, and one of the first Governors of Swift's Hospital. By the will we learn that M'Auley was one of Swift's most esteemed friends. He is thus mentioned:—"To Alexander M'Auley I bequeath the gold box in which the freedom of the City of Dublin was presented to me, as a testimony of the esteem and love I have for him, on account of his great learning, fine natural parts, unaffected piety and benevolence, and his truly honourable zeal in defence of the legal rights of the clergy in opposition to their unprovoked oppressors."

Alderman Macarel was Lord Mayor in 1738, and Alderman Pearson was Lord Mayor, 1730.

John Rochfort was one of the witnesses to the will.

Sir James Somerville was Sheriff in 1720, Lord Mayor in 1736, and at the same period was knighted. This gentleman was subsequently created a Baronet, by patent, dated June 14, 1748.

Eaton Stannard was Prime Sergeant at Law, and Recorder of Dublin; he was one of the executors of the will.

Philip Tisdall, Judge of the Prerogative Court; Whitney Boleyn, King's Counsel.

Some of the Commissioners, it may be noticed, were Swift's intimate friends, from the circumstance of his having selected them as executors to his will, or having remembered them in that document.

The writ was directed to seventeen gentlemen named, as Commissioners; but only seven names are annexed to the inquisition. The writ commanded any three or more of them to diligently inquire into the case.

The jury, upon which devolved such an important duty as determining the mental condition of Jonathan Swift, was strangely constituted. There are some respectable citizens, and probably, from their position in life, intelligent men; but there are also two carpenters and a currier associated with them. Their task, however, was an easy one, under the guidance of the Commissioners; for, from all we can learn, we may fairly come to the conclusion, that long before the time of the issuing of the writ, the mighty mind of Swift had completely broken down. The first faint clouds which foreshadowed the coming event may easily be traced to a comparatively early period in the life of this truly great man; but the storm which was destined to utterly overwhelm the shattered bark, had already broken over it.

The life of Swift is still to be written; and I have reason to believe it is in progress, and, moreover, that it is in good hands. My object in publishing the contents of the important instrument which I had the good fortune to discover, is to fill up what has hitherto been a blank in the darkest page of the history of the renowned Dean of St. Patrick's.

"George the Second, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, and so forth, to our trusty and well-beloved the Right Hon. Luke Gardner, Esq.; Eaton Stannard, Recorder of the City of Dublin, Esq.; Philip Tisdall, and Boleyn Whitney, Esqrs.; Doctor William Cooper, and Doctor Thomas Trotter; Sir James Somerville, Alderman John Macarell, Alderman Percival Hunt, Alderman Nathaniel Pearson, Alderman Robert

King, Thomas Le Hunt, and Alexander M'Auley, Esq., William Harward and John Rochfort, Esqrs., Charles Grattan and Bellingham Boyle, Esqrs., greeting: Whereas it is given us to understand, by the petition of the Rev. John Grattan and the Rev. James King, that the Rev. Doctor Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin, hath, for these nine months past, been gradually failing in his memory and understanding, and of such unsound mind and memory that he is incapable of transacting any business, or managing, conducting, or taking care either of his estate or person: We, being willing to provide a remedy in this behalf, do command you, or any three or more of you, that you repair to the said Doctor Jonathan Swift, and, by all proper ways and means, you examine him; and, moreover, by the oaths of good and lawful men, by whom the truth of the matter may be best known, you diligently inquire whether the said Doctor Jonathan Swift be a person of unsound mind and memory, and not capable of taking care of his person or fortune, as aforesaid; and if he be, how long he hath been so, and of what lands and tenements, goods and chattles, the said Doctor Jonathan Swift was possessed off at the time he so became of unsound mind and memory, or at any time since, and what is the yearly value thereof, and who is his next heir; and such inquisition as shall be then found, you, or any three or more of you, shall, openly and distinctly, make return thereof to us, in our Chancery in Ireland, on the third day of November next, under your seals and the seals of those by whom the said inquisition shall be made, together with this writ.

"Witness our Justices General and General Gouvernours of our said Kingdom of Ireland, at Dublin, the Twelfth day of August, in the Sixteenth Year of our Reign.

"DOMVILE.

"Exd. Ed. Madden,
Deputy Clerk of the Crown and Hanaper."

"The executors of the within commission appear by the inquisition hereunto annexed—

LUKE GARDINER,
PHILIP TISDALL,
HENRY ROCHFORT,
WILLIAM HARWARD,
BELLINGHAM BOYLE,
PERCIVAL HUNT,
JOHN MACARELL.

"An inquisition taken before us, the Right Hon. Luke Gardiner, Philip Tisdall, Esq.; John Macarell, Percival Hunt, Alderman William Harward, John Rochfort, and Bellingham Boyle, Esqrs., Commissioners by virtue of a Commission of our Sovereign Lord George the Second of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, and soforth, Bearing Date the Twelfth Day of August, in the Sixteenth year of the Reign of his said Majesty, at the Deanery House of St. Patrick's, Dublin, the seventeenth day of August, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and forty-two.

"The Names of the Jury of honest and lawfull Men sworn to enquire and examin of and into the matter specified in said Commission.

EDWD. HUNT, Aldermⁿ.

JOHN ADAMSON, Merch^t.

ROBT. DONOVAN, Merch^t.

ARTHUR LAMPREY, Chand^r.

THOMS. HAMILTON, Brewer.

JOHN WALSH, Carpenter.

JOHN COOKE, Hosier.

JOHN CUMIN, Carpenter.

ERASMUS COPE, Jeweler.

JOHN SICAN, Merch^t.

JOHN MARTIN, Currier.

JOSHUA BARRINGTON, Merch^t.

"Gentlemen,

"Your Issue is to try and Inquire Whether the Rey^d Doctor Jonathan Swift in the annexed Commission named be a person of unsound mind and memory, and not capable of takeing care of his person or Fortune; and if he be, how long he hath been so, and of what Lands, Tenem^{ts}, goods, and Chattles the said Doctor Jonathan Swift was possessed off at the time he so became of unsound mind and memory, or at any time since; and what is the yearly value thereof, and who is his next Heir."

"Wee Find that the Rev^d Doctor Jonathan Swift in the annexed Commission named is a person of unsound mind and memory, and not capable of takeing care of his person or Fortune, and that he hath been soe since the twentyeth day of May last past. And Wee Further find that the said Jonathan Swift was on the said twentyeth day of May, and still is seized and possessed of Lands, Thytes, and Tenements of the clear yearly value of eight hundred pounds sterling, and also possessed of goods and Chattles to the value of ten thousand pounds sterling; and It does not appear to us who is his next Heir."

(Here follow the signatures and seals of the twelve "honest and lawfull men" whose names have been recited.)