

Dr Rush and Therapeutic Horticulture

The starting point for many authors writing about therapeutic horticulture is Dr Benjamin Rush (1745-1813). Rush studied medicine at Edinburgh and then returned to the United States to study academic medicine in the newly-founded University of Pennsylvania at the first medical school in the US. He was appointed to the Chair of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in 1796.

Benjamin Rush published 5 books in a series of *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, the last being concerned with *The Diseases of The Mind* [1812]. In this volume the practice of horticulture is mentioned twice. In the first instance as a remedy for '*hypochondriasis or tristimania*' (hypochondriasis, or a Rush prefers to call it, tristimania, is not in this case an imagined disease but an anxiety or phobic disorder; see pp. 74).

Rush writes...

There are several other remedies which act upon the body through the medium of the mind, and that are proper, in this disease from all its causes. The first of these is, the DESTRUCTION of all old associations and ideas...

2. EMPLOYMENT, or business of some kind. Man was made to be active. Even in paradise he was employed in the healthy and pleasant exercises of cultivating a garden. Happiness consisting in folded arms, and in a pensive contemplation, beneath rural shades, and by the side of purling brooks, never had any existence, except in the brains of mad poets, and love-sick girls and boys. Hypochondriac derangement has always kept pace with the inactivity of body and mind which follows wealth and independence in all countries. It is frequently induced by this cause in those citizens, who retire, after a busy life, into the country, without carrying with them a relish for agriculture, gardening, books, or literary society.

Building, commerce, a public employment, an executorship to a will; above all, agriculture, have often cured this disease. The last, that is, agriculture, by agitating the passions by alternate hope, fear, and enjoyment, and by rendering bodily exercise or labour necessary, is calculated to produce the greatest benefit. Great care should however be taken, never to advise retirement to a part of the country where good society cannot be enjoyed upon easy terms [pp. 117-118].

And as a remedy for *manalgia* which Rush describes in the following manner:

The symptoms of this third and last form of general madness are, taciturnity, downcast looks, a total neglect of dress and person, long nails and beard, disheveled or matted hair, indifference to all surrounding objects, insensibility to heat and cold [pp. 216].

This condition is probably depression and one of the remedies for this is:

9. Labour has several advantages over exercise, in being not only more stimulating, but more durable in its effects, whereby it is more calculated to arrest wrong habits of action, and to restore such as are regular and natural. It has been remarked, that the maniacs of the male sex in all hospitals, who assist in cutting wood, making fires, and digging in a garden, and the females who are employed in washing, ironing, and scrubbing floors, often recover, while persons, whose rank exempts them from performing such services, languish away their lives within the walls of the hospital.

[The last sentence of the paragraph above is to be found in many texts on therapeutic horticulture and gardening!]

Rush then continues by describing the case history of a man who had apparently cured himself of his madness by working on the hay harvest.

In favour of the benefits of labour, in curing this disease, I shall select one from among many facts that might be mentioned. In the year 1801 I attended an English Gentleman, soon after his arrival in America, who was afflicted with this grade of madness. My prescriptions relieved, but did not cure him. He returned to his family in Maryland, where, in the time of hay harvest, he was allured into a meadow, and prevailed upon to take a rake into his hands, and to assist in making hay. He worked for some time, and brought on thereby a profuse sweat, which soon carried off his disease. This account of his remedy and cure I received from himself, in a very sensible letter written a few weeks after his recovery.

I have often wished, and lately advise, that the mad people in our hospital should be provided with the tools of a number of mechanical arts. Some of them should be laborious, and employ the body chiefly; others ingenious, and of a nature to exercise and divert the mind more than the body. None of them should be carried on by instruments, with which it would be easy for the maniacs to hurt themselves or others.

In the last paragraph Rush advocates the use of physical and mental activities in order to promote the well-being of his patients in what could

be seen as an early form of occupational therapy.

Although Rush advises the use of horticulture for his patients some of his other remedies are not so benign and include bloodletting, purges, emetics and reduced dietary intake [pp. 99-100]. He also considers the effectiveness of episodes of terror in curing madness [pp. 211] but advises caution:

In the use of it, great care will be necessary to suit its force to the existing state of the system.

The remedies he describes were the recognised treatments of his time and Rush, himself, was firmly rooted in the thinking of the eighteenth century at a time when medical knowledge was rapidly advancing into the next century. His enthusiasm for bloodletting and his theories on the causes of insanity has led to some critical views of Rush, but it is important to note that throughout his *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon The Diseases of the Mind* Rush advocates the humane treatment of patients with the minimum of restraint or coercion at a time when the inmates of asylums were regarded by many as a legitimate form of entertainment.

Whether the treatment of Rush's patients was indeed as humane as Rush wanted is also open to question. In his book on the history of psychiatry Shorter [1997] quotes from a visitor's account of a tour of the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1787 in which the visitor describes patients incarcerated in small cells and lying naked on beds of straw [Shorter, 1997, pp. 15 -16]. The context of this account is now difficult to ascertain since Shorter does not return to the original text but quotes from another volume. This may be a story which has altered in its retelling and Benjamin Rush is probably best remembered for what he actually wrote regarding the treatment of patients.

The role of Benjamin Rush in the history of American Medicine is related in Lester S King's excellent book *Transformations in American Medicine – From Benjamin Rush to William Osler* and Hawke's [1971] biography of Rush will be of interest to those wishing to know more not only about his medical interests but also his social and political ones.

References:

Hawke, D. F. (1971) *Benjamin Rush: revolutionary gadfly*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill

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History of Medicine Series, No 15, New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1962.

Shorter, E. (1997) *A History of Psychiatry: from the era of the asylum to the age of Prozac* , New York: John Wiley& Sons, Inc.