

# Seventy-five years of The British Journal of Psychology 1904–1979

by Alan D.B. Clarke

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‘Psychology which till recently was known among us chiefly as Mental Philosophy and was mainly concerned with problems of a more or less speculative and transcendental character, has now at last attained the position of a positive science... As evidence of this increased importance which Psychology has now acquired, several facts may be mentioned: First, within the last fifteen years seven serial publications have appeared in other countries all are still flourishing devoted entirely to its affairs... Also there are now some forty laboratories in existence for the experimental investigation of psychological questions... Again in this country half a dozen lectureships have been lately founded in different universities solely to promote the study of Psychology as a science. We have also a society of professed psychologists which meets frequently for the discussion of printed papers and the exhibition of experimental apparatus and results... No wonder then that – as was stated in our preliminary circular “the belief is widespread that the time has come for starting an English journal devoted exclusively to psychology in all its branches,” analytical, genetic, comparative, experimental, pathological, ethnical, etc... With the vast range of topics just indicated it will side with no school and have no predilections. Its one aim will be to serve as the “organ” of all alike who are working at one of the branches into which Psychology has now differentiated.’ Thus wrote the first Editors of *The British Journal of Psychology*, James Ward and W. H. R. Rivers, in January 1904 who had founded it independently. It was not until 1914 that the Society took it over (Hearnshaw, 1964).

The first volume makes interesting reading. Of the 18 articles, four were by McDougall, and two by Ward. Single contributions came from such men as Sherrington, Spearman, C. S. Myers and Rivers. The Proceedings of the Society from February, 1902, are recorded and lists of papers read at its meetings from that time and onwards. The Editors’ hopes for width of coverage were vindicated in the first volume, although perception took first with almost half the contributions devoted to such phenomena as binocular flicker; the effects of single brief stimulation of the eye; the development of visual perception in a man who had undergone a successful operation for congenital cataract; intensity of visual sensation in relation to the duration of the stimulus; the perception of distance and magnitude; an illusion and the functions of retinal rods. Other articles concerned the definition of psychology; a 16th century psychologist; the taste-names of primitive peoples; a psycho-genetic theory of language; mental and physical tests applied to epileptic and normal subjects; the limits of genetic and comparative psychology; localisation of position; rhythm in primitive music; observations on the senses of the Todas (an aboriginal tribe in South India); mental operations and mental fatigue.

If we follow the contents of the *Journal* at 10 year intervals, some rough idea may be gained of the changes and fashions in reported psychological research. Thus by 1914, although perception was still dominant, there is a good deal on mental measurement; the role of repression in forgetting; imagery in dreams; immediate memory; simultaneous versus successive associations in learning; perseveration. By 1924 a further broadening of content had already occurred. Two papers are solely

statistical; two are concerned with the psycho-galvanic reflex. There is much interest in psychological tests and also the constancy of the IQ, with no less than five contributions in this area. There are still a number of discursive papers such as 'The relevance of psycho-analysis to art criticism' but the *Journal* has clearly settled down to being primarily concerned with reports of empirical investigations.

The volume for 1934/5 again reflects the increasing interest in statistics, with 11 contributions and two relevant critical notices; there are four papers on psychological tests, but perception still occupies a favoured position, with auditory perception receiving most attention. Gestalt psychology in relation to interrupted and uninterrupted tasks is the subject of two contributions. One notes also the increasing activities of the BPS as reported in the Proceedings; there are by now around 700 members.

The 1944/5 volume for obvious reasons is very thin, running to a mere 93 pages. The death of G. F. Stout is recorded, and a year later there are obituary notices on Spearman and Kenneth Craik. The influence of the war can clearly be seen; there is a study of treason, and another on the British soldier: changing attitudes and ideas. Eysenck bows in with a study on graphological analysis and psychiatry, using the captive population at The Mill Hill Emergency Hospital. Patrick Slater reports on the intelligence of different types of neurotics, using analysis of variance. Factor analysis, which was soon to become such a dominant theme, is represented by a factorial study of picture tests for young children. Other articles were concerned with some sound values in English; memory for position; scoring methods and motor perseveration tasks; identifying aesthetic types; and the environment and the child, a Cambridge study comparing the home characteristics of child guidance and normal school children. By now the BPS recorded a membership list of close on 1000.

In contrast the 1954 volume runs to 320 pages, and the Proceedings of the Society are to be found in its own *Bulletin*. One notices that abnormal psychology is for the first time heavily represented; there are articles on brain damage and apparent motion; a critical notice on Eysenck's paper 'The effects of psychotherapy' together with his reply; and two early papers in The 'new' field of mental deficiency research. Sir Godfrey Thomson's critical notice on the Uppsala Symposium on Psychological Factor Analysis makes interesting reading. Among the many other articles, those that caught this reviewer's eye were a paper by Hearnshaw on conceptual thinking, Oldfield's memory mechanisms and the theory of schemata, Goldman-Eisler's paper on variability of the speed of talking and its relation to length of utterance, Berlyne's theory of human curiosity, and his additional experimental study, and a paper on the effect of hunger upon drinking patterns in the rat. As reflected in this volume, psychology has widened and deepened, but the *Journal* still finds room for a philosophical review. The death of S. J. F. Philpott is recorded.

The 1964 volume again differs considerably from the 1954 edition, not least in size, having expanded to over 500 pages. There is a wide variety of experimental studies, admixed with several much more general articles, of which 'Consciousness and behaviourism' by J. D. Keehn attacking Burt's attack on behaviourism (followed by Burt's elegant reply) is an excellent example. Abnormal psychology has blossomed further, with contributions on autistic and subnormal children; the performance and activation of schizophrenics and normals; the spiral maze and delinquency; pursuit rotor learning in chronic psychotics; and a major symposium on personality variables in psychiatric classification consisting of five papers. Various aspects of language and memory are reported, and the animal field is represented by an article on imprinting and short-term retention, and another on responses of the ferret to stimulus change. One is struck by the very wide range of subjects – something for everyone. And with the great increase in books published, the Reviews section seems increasingly important. Finally there is an obituary notice on Ernst Kretschmer.

The 1974 volume brings us almost to the present day. The *Journal* has increased in size by another 80 or so pages, and the Book Review section is now some 90 pages in length, thus occupying about 15 per cent of the contents. ‘New’ topics include repertory grid measures for evaluating map formats; cognitive performance of introverts and extraverts following acute alcohol ingestion; orientating and defence reactions; handedness; developmental spelling retardation; hemisphere function and paired-associate learning; temporal integration in the pigeon; the language of inconsistency; and instances and inferences. Again, something for everyone, but apart from a note on Broadbent’s *In Defence of Empirical Psychology* and his reply, there is a dearth of ‘broad’ articles.

The *Journal* appears to have lost its subtitle *General Section* in 1955, presumably through conscious decision rather than printer’s lapse. But since memories are long, many still remember it as such. The initiation of *The British Journal of Psychology – Medical Section* (now *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*) in 1920, *The British Journal of Psychology – Statistical Section* (now *The British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology*) in 1947, and *The British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* in 1962, has taken many specialist articles away from *The British Journal of Psychology* although with the post-war explosion of psychological studies, width of coverage remains an obvious characteristic. While the reporting of original research has always been a prime feature, it seems to the present writer that in future more room should be made for review articles which bring together narrower studies in a critical yet constructive fashion – someone needs to put the bits together in most fields.

In the early days, some of the Editors had very long reigns. Although Ward resigned after only six years, Rivers now joined by Myers, went on until the end of 1912, leaving the latter in control until 1924. F. C. Bartlett then took over until 1948, the first four editors thus spanning a period of 44 years, of which Myers and Bartlett accounted for 37. Each was a remarkable man.

Ward’s influence was profound, although as Hearnshaw (1964) indicates, he attempted ‘to keep psychology unspotted by physiological impurities and psychometric methods... (he) turned psychology away from empirical investigations and towards philosophical abstractions. The one link which Ward always retained with scientific thought was his emphasis on genetic development, and for this philosophers even purer than himself heavily criticized him.’ There is, perhaps, some truth in this indictment, and there is little doubt that Rivers and Myers who took over the editorship from Ward were more wholeheartedly dedicated to empirical psychology.

Rivers qualified in medicine, and was much influenced by Hughlings Jackson, Victor Horsley and Henry Head. For a time he acted as clinical assistant at Bethlem Hospital, giving occasional lectures at University College, London. He was then appointed at Cambridge having developed an expertise on vision. ‘Rivers believed that the most fruitful results could be obtained from experimental techniques when abnormal states, whether produced pathological conditions or artificially by drugs, were subjected to testing’ (Hearnshaw, 1964). The Rivers–Ward partnership must have been a less happy one than the subsequent Rivers–Myers joint editorship.

The name of C. S. Myers is much better known to the present generation (see, for example Bartlett, 1965; Rodger, 1971). Myers had been a student of Rivers, as had McDougall, and all three took part in the Torres Straits expedition of 1898, one of the first exercises in cross-cultural psychology. This expedition, writes Hearnshaw (1964) ‘shaped the outlook of Rivers and Myers, the two principal figures in Cambridge psychology before the First World War, and through their influence coloured the thinking of F. C. Bartlett who followed Myers as director of the Cambridge laboratory after the war’. Myers, who qualified in medicine and earlier had attended Rivers’ lectures at Cambridge, became a lecturer there in 1909, and director in 1912. The power of the Cambridge School became

increasingly felt and F. C. Bartlett, who was later to say that Myers was the greatest single influence in his professional life, continued and expanded it.

Bartlett's early training in philosophy at London, writes Hearnshaw, had a remarkably slight corrupting influence on his psychology. His effect on British psychology was far reaching; in 1960, for example, more than half the chairs of psychology in this country were held by Cambridge graduates trained by him (Hearnshaw, 1964). He worked under Myers in Cambridge from 1912 to 1922 when he succeeded to the directorship of the Laboratory. The main weight of the struggle to achieve recognition for psychology at Cambridge now fell upon Bartlett, who became the first professor of experimental psychology in 1931 (Broadbent, 1970).

Of all our early editors, Bartlett's influence was undoubtedly the most significant. How did this come about? Broadbent (1970) in an admirable appreciation of the man advances three answers. 'The main factor was probably a matter of personal style...a breadth of interest in all fields of psychology, and in many aspects of life in general...This made him friends outside his own subject, and also guaranteed to his professional writings a realism and contact with life sometimes lacking in academic psychologists...Another aspect of this personal style was the concentration upon research and the stimulating exchange of ideas, rather than a carefully drilled and organized teaching programme such a style of communication leaves no record that can be pointed out to succeeding generations...(it) also places very serious demands on the student ...' A second characteristic was 'the extraordinary sophistication of his thinking, which is in many ways still considerably in advance of current preoccupations'. The third feature was the continuing development of his ideas in response to the changing world in which he lived.

Those who take part in the founding of a subject, Broadbent points out, must play a role which no successor can hope to emulate, and our first four editors were certainly immensely influential both through the Journal and in their wider responsibilities.

Bartlett was succeeded by D. W. Harding. At that point the reserve of papers awaiting publication (or consideration) had been drastically run down, writes Harding (personal communication), and, moreover, some papers that might have appeared in *The British Journal of Psychology* were now sent to the newly founded *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*; to keep the *The British Journal of Psychology* appearing meant that for the next few issues articles had actively to be sought. The date of receiving manuscripts, often only a month or two before publication, tells its own story of hand-to-mouth existence in those days. Fortunately the flow of papers rapidly increased after 2 or 3 years, and the editorial problem became the more familiar one of being sufficiently selective to allow of publication within a reasonable time. In 1955 James Drever became editor, being in turn succeeded in 1958 by Boris Semeonoff, in 1965 by Arthur Summerfield, in 1968 by Wladek Sluckin and in 1973 by Alan Clarke. Editorial Boards throughout the whole period have varied in size and in title; Cyril Burt seems to have had the longest innings, being first recorded in 1913 and departing in 1964. A fascinating account of the early days of the Society and of *The British Journal* is to be found in Beatrice Edgell's article (1947).

In 25 years' time the centenary of the *Journal* will be celebrated. The future Editor is currently working hard at her A-levels, and I cannot forbear to mention has applied to the University of Hull as her first choice

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The year is now 2004 and she has a full-time post in the BPS office which was recently transferred to

Albemarle Street from Leicester, rents in London being so much cheaper than elsewhere, since the more affluent firms have already moved their tiny offices out to the New Villages. The BPS office, incidentally, is run dispassionately by the new Business Manager, a black box measuring 50x25x5 cm.

The *Journal* is in continuous production, and is available at the cheap rate after 6 p.m. New articles can be scanned weekly by videopayphone on insertion of a £25 piece, and if of interest can be reprinted for a further £50 via the subscriber's office or domestic POT (print-out terminal). By now many people, in addition to the more usual qualifications in windmill maintenance, subsistence farming and home plumbing, seem to have a degree in psychology, and with the characteristic 2 day working week, psychological research has become a very popular recreation for the long week-end. Looking back at old issues of the *Journal* one realizes how primitive psychology was before the micro-electronics era. It is noted that the 75th anniversary issue in 1979 includes an Editorial which indicates that the then Editor had absolutely no conception of how psychology, or indeed society, might develop, and that he stood on the threshold of a revolution in both.

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A. D. B. CLARKE

*Editor*

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