

Changing scene by Frederic Charles Bartlett

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The late Prof. Beatrice Edgell (1947) told how the British Psychological Society began its existence at an informal small meeting in London on 24 October 1901. This, therefore, is our Jubilee Year, and it seemed to me that perhaps the most fitting thing that I could try to do this afternoon would be to go back over some of the story of these fifty years of growth and development, and to tell the tale of a changing scene. There are indeed, as I am well aware, others who have a greater right to do this than I can have, because their relations with our Society began earlier and have been closer than mine. Sir Cyril Burt, Prof. Pear, Prof. Flugel, Prof. Valentine, Dr E. O. Lewis, I believe the Society's next president, Dr William Brown, and no doubt others as well, were all active members before me, and I owe them and tender them all some apology for my choice of a subject which they could all deal with more fully and more intimately. But it seemed that it would be wrong to ignore a great occasion, and I will attempt to talk in the main only of things that I remember, and people whom I have myself known.

On that day in October 1901 I was just beyond my fifteenth birthday. I cannot recall whether I had ever as yet heard the word 'psychology', but if I had, certainly it had never entered into my wildest dreams that this subject would play any large part in my own life. I was in fact at that time very slowly struggling back to health again after an exceedingly serious illness, and the doctors had prescribed for me, as, later, I heard that they had under not very dissimilar circumstances prescribed for Prof. James Ward, a life in the open air. There I was, far away in the depths of the country, at the north end of the Cotswolds, learning something about the habits of birds and beasts, exploring ancient and overgrown roadways, walking far in all weathers, and, as strength returned, playing every game I could get. Nothing seemed less likely than that I should have a life of study and experiment. And indeed, looking back now, it seems to have been the merest chance remark that sent me to a bookshop a few years later to order a book about logic, and then not much after that, my first two books of psychology: Stout's *Manual*, and the old red-covered first edition of C. S. Myers's *Text-Book of Experimental Psychology*. The die was cast, but if I am to be quite truthful, I must confess that I did not then recognize the significance of the pattern. Of course, I thought that psychology, as it was presented to me in these two famous volumes, was full of interest, and I did a lot of amateur experiments, cutting strips of coloured paper out of pattern books, building up some bits of home-made apparatus, and no doubt bothering and confounding my relatives and friends with a lot of odd questions. But I thought also that there were plenty of other things that called to a young man's fancy.

All this time the British Psychological Society was continuing its small and disputatious meetings that I was to read and hear a lot about later on. How many a

time I have regretted that I did not hear W. H. R. Rivers backing Hering against Helmholtz, Myers weightily holding the balance, Ward getting very worked up about the nature of 'black',

McDougall expounding what I still think to have been the best experiments he ever did, his earlier Cambridge work on colour vision. It was not in fact until about nine, or perhaps ten, years after the beginning that I went up to Cambridge, met Dr E. O. Lewis and Dr Robert Rusk, both of whom treated me with infinite kindness, heard from them stories of the great men among our founders and builders, and then on one, to me, never to be forgotten day, encountered G. F. Stout at a tea party.

It must, I think, have been towards the end of a May Term in Cambridge, for I remember how the sunshine was streaming in through french windows leading to a somewhat enclosed garden, and it was exceedingly hot. There was an unfortunate lady who was mostly silent and obviously nervous. At length she ventured to remark: 'I do like my cup of tea. First it makes you hot and then it makes you cool.' At this Stout exploded with terrific violence. 'I never heard such rubbish', he said. 'First hot and then cold! Nonsense! Absurd! Ridiculous!'

The poor well-meaning lady subsided into complete silence. I was sorry for her. After all, she only said the right thing in a wrong way.

Stout asked me what I was going to do, and then, probably for the first time, I said suddenly that I thought I should try to teach psychology. 'It can't be done,' he said. 'Nobody can teach psychology. It can be learned. It can't be taught.'

Then I thought he was wrong. Now I know what he meant, and I think he was not far off the mark.

The reason I met Stout first, before any of the others, known by name at least to us all, who had more to do with our Society—though he was, of course, an original member and an Honorary Member for many years—was that I lived a little more than a year in Cambridge before I joined St John's College. I went to St John's principally because W. H. R. Rivers was there, and I was being torn between psychology and anthropology, with a bit of a lurking desire for medicine in the background.

This was already after that fateful division of pathways which took place during or following the Torres Straits Expedition, and probably shaped the early history of the Society more decisively than any other single event. This was the division which deflected Myers finally into psychology and Rivers, for many years, away from psychology and into anthropology.

I can bring back to mind very clearly the first time I met Rivers. Already he had reduced the large, somewhat military looking moustache which adorns his earlier photographs. He seemed to me tall, spare, sharp-shouldered, full of nervous though quiet energy. He sat on a sofa in a large room untidy with books and papers. A College 'gyp' brought up tea, two or three bits of bread and butter, and some very sawdusty Madeira cake. He ate nothing and drank only milk and water. He told me then, and many times later, that if I wanted to study anthropology, or, I gathered, do

anything else that was any good I must first spend many hours in the psychological laboratory learning the psycho-physical methods. I did.

Let me now again pay my tribute to C. S. Myers, and to Sir Cyril Burt. Myers was then director of Cambridge experimental psychology, and Burt was his assistant, who took charge of the practical classes, and ran them with a most delightful mixture of humanity and scientific precision. I doubt if we can have been a very rewarding class. Privately we grumbled and groused like anything. We vowed we would lift no more weights, learn no more nonsense syllables, strike no more tuning forks, cross out no more e's. Colour wheels were more fun. We threw ourselves at the dynamometer and the ergograph in the hope of beating one another or smashing the apparatus. Optical illusions were temporarily attractive, but we got a bit tired of the Müller-Lyer. Everything that could be was in a strict pattern of psychological method, and now I know it was greatly to our good. But how sweetly we escaped to tachistoscopic experiments on perception and to Burt's own early intelligence tests!

Sometimes now I take down my first experimental note-books and then I realize most clearly of all how changed is the scene since that time forty and more years ago. We worked in the main with the stock-in-trade of Helmholtz and Hering, of Wundt, of Blix, Goldscheider and Von Frey, of G. E. Müller, of Kraepelin. There were a few refreshing excursions into the fields of the Würzburg school, a little of Wilhelm Stern, and a little, a very little, of the new psychology of mental tests, and of Jung's form of word associations. It was Germans, Germans all the way, and if we were going to stick to psychology then to Germany sooner or later we must all surely go.

There were several difficulties that I am afraid are still apt to beset the student of experimental psychology, though I hope less acutely than they did us. When we left the laboratory we promptly dropped it all. What had it to do with our daily life? It was indeed a laboratory game, boring in parts, engrossing in others, but just a laboratory game. And it was not very easy to link up the experiments with the general teaching. When Myers lectured or Burt talked to us it was less difficult. They gave us the classical experimental backgrounds and found time for reflexions upon real life. But when we went to lectures by James Ward and Prof. Dawes Hicks, it was like journeying to a far country.

Ward's first class of the year was a bit of an ordeal. He would come in, suitably late, struggling into an academic gown as he came. He would sit down and take us all in, and then he would go round the class one by one. 'You there. What have you come for?' It did not matter much what we said. He would make it very clear that we were probably wasting our time and certainly wasting his. 'I don't suppose you'll understand anything', he would say. But when, after this, he talked, with great informality and charm, he held us all entranced, whether we understood it (and speaking for myself I frequently did not) or not. Sometimes he asked us for questions, and if we put any he would say, with intense patience, that we had missed all the points which he had most clearly made, and if we did not he would say that anybody who had understood anything would have masses of questions to ask. James Ward became, and I am very happy to be able to say still remains, one of my tremendous heroes. He had done most of his revolutionary work for psychology before this Society was started. Later he spoke to me often about the Society and the people who were shaping its future. Still more he spoke of the *Journal*, which I gathered had been

not too bad in its first two years but afterwards had fallen off sadly. He had been one of the original guarantors, and he was mightily afraid that he would lose his money, but I am glad to say that he did not. He was sorely troubled about contemporary developments. Outside of the small range which he would never admit to be more than 'psycho-physics', and a few experiments on memory, he thought most experimental work was trivial, and in a laboratory he was an unhappy man. He knew more than most People realized about the tremendous things that were happening to clinical psychology in Vienna, but he called them 'mad'.

It is, of course, not psychology alone that has changed, but the whole pace and character of social life. The two things have run together as it is inevitable that they should. In the University everybody was more at leisure. There was far less teaching. The only sense of urgency was internal to whatever subject was being studied. All our professors and many of our lecturers entertained us to lunch at least once a term and kept open house at Sunday tea-time. I suppose the food was nothing out of the way then, but now it makes one's mouth water only to remember it.

And the meetings of this Society: they were mostly on Saturday afternoons and in London, as they are now. They were small and the company rather highly selected in an academic sense. The discussion was generally lively and there was Shand's dinner to follow, a delight to the flesh and the mind. I suppose there are few people to remember Alexander Shand now; tall, perhaps somewhat gaunt, white haired when I knew him and almost always in a spick and span navy blue suit. His interests ranged widely wherever a magnificent literary imagination took him. He seemed to have read everything that was worth while and a lot besides. To listen to his psychological discussions was a great treat, but a greater still to sit by him at dinner.

Into this world, cultivated, rather satisfied, well fed and sociable, and preoccupied with its learned problems, came the threat and then the reality of war. The Society still continued to meet, though less frequently, and generally without the dinner. Soon all of us were absorbed, in one way and another, into the great struggle. I cannot attempt to tell the story in detail but only to pick out those things that were happening which were destined to change the British Psychological Society and the whole teaching and practice of psychology in fundamental ways. I think there were three of these. Two may be called new, but the third was already well under way in this country under the inspiration of Cyril Burt and Prof. Spearman and others.

First, whether it was by accident or by foresight, experimental psychology got tied up with technical physical advances. This was due in the main to the influence of Myers and of Prof. Pear. Submarines were already being attacked by underwater methods of sound transmission, and in this a body known as the Lancashire Anti-Submarine Committee, led by the late Lord Rutherford, took a somewhat emphatic lead. But it soon became clear that not everybody could operate the instruments which were invented and constructed, and Myers and Pear together were able to see that a group of us had the chance to develop what was probably the first really organized effort of team personnel selection, in a technical sense.

Secondly there was the vast increase of neurotic disorders among the fighting men of the First World War. Myers, Rivers, McDougall, Dr William Brown, Elliot Smith and

again Prof. Pear began to show what psychology could do to meet this menace to health and efficiency.

Thirdly, but perhaps the best way to tell of this will be by a brief story. I remember well how, towards the end of the War, Dr W. V. Bingham came over from America. He brought with him copies of the American Army general intelligence test, and I met him on Saturday afternoon at University College. I am not quite sure who else was there, but certainly there were Myers, and Spearman, and Prof. Edgell, and perhaps Burt. Anyway, Bingham gave us all the tests and as far as I can remember not many of us would have made the grade. We felt a bit doubtful about them, but it was clear enough that they had come in some form or other to stay, and we must be prepared to do something about it. After all, Spearman and Burt particularly had little enough to learn in this field.

It seemed then and for many years following that these three developments—the technological link with the physical sciences, the strong urge to base everything in psychology clinical analysis, and the intelligence test movement with its active association with statistics—could not well be brought together. Each represented an approach which appeared somehow a bit distasteful, or at least foreign to anybody who preferred to adopt one of the others. But during that same period another development took place in this country, the fundamental implications of which have not yet, I think, been fully realized. It was due to Sir Henry Head and Dr Gordon Holmes.

Head is not easy to put into a word portrait. He was a man of most brilliant parts, with a glancing intelligence that shot off in all directions, with remarkable histrionic powers, equally at home in literary, artistic and scientific circles. More than most people he combined a terrific capacity for rather impatient experiment with an amazingly fruitful power of guessing. He was a large man, florid to look at in those days, flamboyant, a bit of a buccaneer. He could easily have been mistaken for an artist or a poet, and, indeed, he had published a book of poetry which many thought very nearly first rate. Once when he was having dessert after a feast at St John's College in the Combination Room, where the long table was lit by tall candles in their gleaming silver stands, completely carried away and waving his arms in magnificent gesture he declaimed, 'The table lit by a thousand candles'. Rivers's old 'gyp' was passing by at the time. He stopped, bent over: 'Two hundred and fifty seven, sir', he said, 'to be exact.'

It was during the First World War that Head began effectively his work on aphasia, famous at the time, though now, I am sorry to say, apparently less regarded. Most of his patients were soldiers with gun-shot wounds in the head but otherwise healthy. His method was a highly original combination of experiment, test and clinical analysis and assessment. From time to time Head used to invite me to go up to London for discussion, the discussion being in fact almost all on one side. He put me through all his tests and experiments, and I must say that he made it hard to get any results different from the ones he knew to be right. But never mind, they were genuine experiments, and in his work the three main developments of these war years came together.

Prof. Edgell recorded the factual history of the great changes that came to this Society in the years between the two Great Wars. What I will try to do is to tell the story more from the inside and in terms of some of the principal personalities concerned.

W. H. R. Rivers was back with a bang right in the middle of the psychological scene. All those reclusive habits which, when I first knew him, he seemed to be hanging on to with grim determination, he gaily flung to the winds. He knew everybody and went everywhere. He produced paper after paper, all of them theoretical, all sweeping and dogmatic, and all of them written out in handwriting that was almost completely unintelligible to anybody except himself, but in language and with ideas that everybody thought he could understand. By bent of mind and character he was really no organizer of people—though in his own way he tried his hand at this quite a lot in these days—but an untiring organizer of ideas. He had a vast and humanizing influence on the intellectual outlook and preoccupations of the Society, but none at all, save only indirectly, upon its shape and outward constitution.

Yet the indirect influence was great enough. It came through C. S. Myers, who was a little younger and then in the habit of discussing all his schemes with Rivers. Both of them in those days saw psychology finding its place in every form of human activity—medical industrial, technical, political, literary and artistic, and educational—and gathering into its fold all manner of people of intelligence and good will. They shared the same vision, but whereas Rivers passed it on to others in a personal way, Myers had the patience the skill and the genius to give it an institutional form.

In 1922 there was an International Conference of Psychology at Oxford. Anybody who cares to look up the published record of the Proceedings will see how much it forecasted the impending expansion both of this Society and of psychological interests generally in this country. Myers was its President and was in fact behind the scenes in every part of its organization. Everything that became a live sectional interest of the Society had its place there: the general and experimental, the industrial, the medical, the social and the aesthetic. The manner of it was also significant. The appeal was wide and unlimited, but the leading performers were in fact selected unobtrusively but with great tact and skill. The German dominance had gone. It is true that a small band of Germans were there and made a profound impression. But they were themselves in revolt against the classic German tradition; they were Wertheimer and Köhler and Koffka. If one looks at this Conference as a whole it is easy to see that its main trend was either wholly away from the academic and intellectualized psychology of the past, or at least towards an effort to humanize all the rather arid traditions.

In these days Myers was restless, unhappy about the state and status of psychology but unswervingly loyal to what he regarded as its true claims, and full of plans. The British Psychological Society must grow. It had to grow in order to maintain its *Journal*, but apart from that it must grow to match the rapidly expanding interests in animal and human behaviour, which, as he saw before most people, must profoundly modify psychological study and research, if not within our control, then outside of it and probably to its own cost. Of course, he was not alone. Spearman, Burt, Pear, Drever, Prof. Edgell, Flugel and a good many others played their part as well, but I think we would all acknowledge that he was the chief architect.

This was the period during which the three principal lines of psychological interest which grew up during the First World War proceeded in extremely rapid, but in the main, separate, growth. Above all, maybe, they were the years during which almost every psychologist proclaimed himself an anti-intellectualist. Feeling, emotion and instinct were the master keys, and in many quarters they were melted down into a single master key in the pattern provided by the genius of Sigmund Freud. Almost equally they were the years of tests, and selection by test for all manner of practical activities, and of the statistical analysis of test results which, oddly enough in spite of all clinical bias, seemed in many ways to be holding fast to an intellectualist basis. Both of these movements naturally took many psychologists, especially in America, into a world of society, and methods of social investigation were rapidly shaped which borrowed both from the clinical and from the test pattern of approach. All this time I think experiment proper in psychology was a little unhappy, alternatively becoming immersed in more and more detail of the classical type, and trying to break out of the laboratory but uncertain how it could do so without doing violence to the established principals of scientific method.

All this was bound to be reflected in the proceedings and organization of the Society. It grew rapidly in size, as everybody knows, but I fancy that its sectional form tended rather to divide than to unite its interests, for each section shared in the movement common now to all science and most knowledge and became more and more specialized. Professional problems and questions of status and reward, unknown to the Society in the earlier days, became inevitably more insistent, and however much those of us born in easier times were tempted to disregard them, we could not deny that they are important and must somehow be solved.

Then came the Second World War. We are too near to this as yet to assess fully its impact upon psychology and the Society. But one thing seems to me to be already clear enough. It that the technical achievements upon which the conduct of almost all military operations now depend helped both to re-establish experiment again as the method of scientific advance without which no sure progress can be made, and also to bring the laboratory into closer touch than ever before with the world outside. It now seems that the emotionalism of the twenties and thirties was as one-sided and insufficient as the intellectualism that preceded it. It even seems that social problems cannot be finally or satisfactorily solved by just thinking about them and adumbrating general ideas and schemes. We are perhaps learning how to combine the clinical with the experimental; we are perhaps coming to see that no matter how sectional and specialized our particular interests may be they must come together in a basic methodology which can unite explorers in all the fields of human knowledge.

What all this may mean for the British Psychological Society nobody can yet tell. But when I try to compare especially the psychological laboratory of to-day with the environment in which I began to work, I see a tremendous change of scene. The sense of leisure has gone but with it also, to a large degree, though not yet entirely, a sense of artificiality. Psychology, especially on the experimental side, is no longer just hoping to be a science based upon a little anatomy and physiology and a lot of speculation. It has its widely acknowledged link with all the other sciences and with all the practical activities of man, individual and social. It demands an equipment far greater, more specialized, and at the same time more all round, than we ever had, and it offers chances of which we never dreamed. But above everything else, as I see it,

the old puppet subjects of the early German psychologists have had their time. They have played many a good play. Their strings are broken. Their commendatory epitaphs can be written and they can be put away in their boxes. In their places we will have real people.

Reference

EDGELL, B. (1947). The British Psychological Society. *Brit. J. Psychol.* **37**, 113–32.

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