



John Charles Bucknill (1817–1897)

Andrew J. Larner¹ · Christopher Gardner-Thorpe²

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John Charles Bucknill was not a neurologist as currently understood, but an alienist or psychiatrist. Nevertheless, it is the argument of this paper that he merits designation as a “Pioneer in Neurology” for his contributions to the beginnings of *Brain: a journal of neurology*, one of the most eminent journals in the field over the past 150 years. Of the founding editors of *Brain*, John Hughlings Jackson (1835–1911) [10] and David Ferrier (1843–1928) [7] are familiar names to neurologists, and James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938), although an alienist, has been included in the Pioneers series [2]. Evidently then, Bucknill is the least well-known of *Brain*’s founding quadrumvirate, at least in neurological circles.

Bucknill’s biography *qua* alienist has been recounted [4, 8]. After training at University College London, he was appointed aged 26 as superintendent of the newly opened Devon County Lunatic Asylum at Exminster, a village just south of the city of Exeter. During his 18 years there, he pioneered methods of non-restraint and when overcrowding became an issue (as it did for all county asylums in this era), he experimented with housing chronic patients in small houses both in and beyond the asylum grounds [6].

Bucknill was a prolific writer. He co-authored, with Daniel Hack Tuke (1827–1895), a physician at York Retreat, the significant textbook, *A Manual of Psychological Medicine* (1858), in which his contribution dealt with the diagnosis, pathology and treatment of insanity [1]. Perhaps most significantly for his subsequent role in the history of neurology, he was the first editor of the *Asylum Journal of Medical Science*, official journal of the Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane. Commenced in 1853, Bucknill served as editor until 1862, renaming it the

Journal of Mental Science in 1858 (it became the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 1963) [4].

As befitting an erudite gentleman physician, he took an interest in the works of Shakespeare, publishing books on *The Psychology of Shakespeare* (1859) and *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare* (1860). He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) of London in 1859 and of the Royal Society in 1866. Between 1862 and 1875, he was Lord Chancellor’s Visitor in Lunacy, a public office with the remit to inspect care and treatment of patients deemed insane by the Court of Chancery. He was Lumleian lecturer at the RCP in 1878 (“Habitual drunkards and insane drunkards”), long before Hughlings Jackson (1890) and Ferrier (1906) received this honour.

The origins of *Brain* are obscure; apparently no records exist for its first 25 years of operation. Some contend that Crichton-Browne was the principal moving force behind its inception since, as superintendent of the West Riding Asylum at Wakefield, he had previously edited the *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Medical Reports (WRLAMR)* between 1871 and 1876. Both Ferrier and Hughlings Jackson made significant contributions to *WRLAMR*, Ferrier’s being based on his experimental researches commenced at the asylum in 1873 [5]. Others have suggested Ferrier was key to *Brain*’s inauguration: “it was Ferrier who urged that the work which the Reports [*WRLAMR*] had begun, should be in some form continued. It then came to be agreed that a “Neurological Journal” should be started in London, and thus “Brain” was launched” [9].

How had Bucknill come to be associated with this group, and hence with the beginnings of *Brain*? Such was the porosity of evolving professional boundaries in the late nineteenth century that diseases now deemed “neurological” would inevitably have been dealt with by alienists (for example epilepsy) as well as by those developing the specialty of neurology. Although he did not publish in *WRLAMR*, Bucknill lectured at Wakefield Asylum at the annual meeting, or *conversazione*, of 20th November 1874 (“Responsibility for Homicide”). His eminence in his field, and his evident commitment to “physical pathology and the direct application of

✉ Andrew J. Larner
andrew.larner2@nhs.net

¹ Department of Brain Repair and Rehabilitation, Institute of Neurology, University College London, London, UK

² History of Medicine Society, Royal Society of Medicine, London, UK

scientific medicine in understanding insanity” [8] marked him as like-minded with the other editors, such that he could endorse the effective “manifesto” of *Brain* (published in *Mind* 1878;3:295): “The Journal will ... include in its scope all that relates to the anatomy, physiology, pathology and therapeutics of the Nervous System. The functions and diseases of the nervous system will be discussed both in their physiological and psychological aspects; but mental phenomena will be treated only in correlation with their anatomical substrata, and mental disease will be investigated as far as possible by the methods applicable to nervous diseases in general”. Bucknill’s extensive prior editorial experience with the *Journal of Mental Science* (it has been estimated that he was responsible for 40–45% of the content in the first three volumes [8]) was also undoubtedly a factor in his recruitment.

Certainly he was an assiduous contributor to the early volumes of *Brain*. He published in the “Critical Digests and Notices of Books” section of the journal in the inaugural issue of April 1878 (as did Ferrier) and continued to do so until 1885 (in all, 15 such publications). Although there were more substantive papers—“The late Lord Chief Justice of England on Lunacy” in 1881; “Dean Swift’s disease” and “The plea of insanity in the case of Charles Julius Guiteau” in 1882—he did not publish any original clinical or experimental work in *Brain*, unlike Crichton-Browne, Hughlings Jackson and Ferrier [5]. His contributions tailed off after the appointment of Armand de Watteville (1846–1925) as “acting editor” in 1884.

Whatever his exact commitments to *Brain* after the mid-1880s, Bucknill still moved in neurological circles. He was a founder member of the Neurological Society of London in 1886, serving on the council with Ferrier; Hughlings Jackson was president, Crichton-Browne was one of the two vice-presidents. Undoubtedly, then the quadrumvirate were involved in the adoption of *Brain* as the official journal of the Neurological Society in 1887.

Bucknill’s name is remembered at Exeter within the Bucknill Centre in Wonford House Hospital and also in Northernhay Gardens where the Volunteer Force of Great Britain, later to become The Territorial Army, is commemorated [3] on a monument that includes his carved image (Fig. 1).

Declarations

Conflicts of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical standard statement This study was performed in accordance with ethical standards.

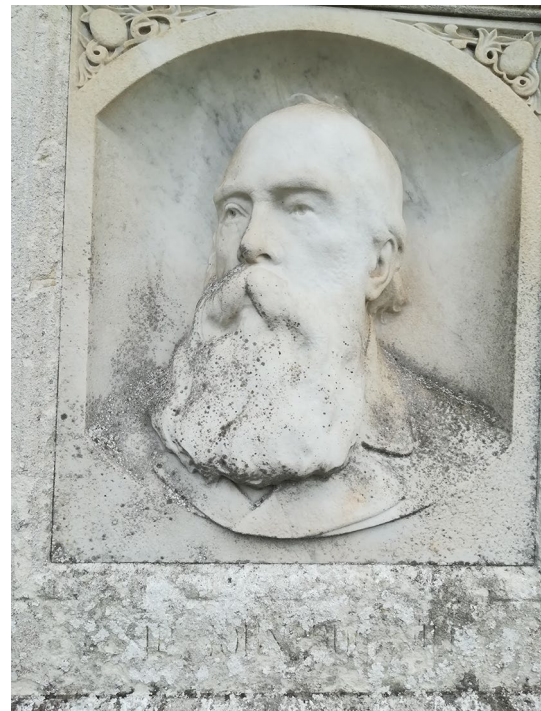


Fig. 1 John Charles Bucknill (1817–1897), bas relief on memorial in Northernhay Gardens, Exeter (corresponding author private collection, taken April 2023)

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