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GRACEFULLY INSANE: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital

By Alex Beam

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One of the most important recent contributions to psychiatric literature was the novel *Mount Misery*, written by Boston psychiatrist Stephen Bergman (a.k.a., Samuel Shem). Bergman laid bare the world of mental health care as Dr. Roy Basch observes it during his year of psychiatric residency.

Bergman's setting was Mount Misery Hospital, which cognoscenti recognized as the Harvard-affiliated McLean in Belmont, Mass. The novel's sinister depiction of psychiatry provoked as much defensive ire within the profession as Bergman's *House of God* had within medicine two decades before. But then, what the young resident witnessed at Mount Misery increasingly was "medicine"—incapacitating levels of drug therapy—analogue to where general practitioners had been centuries before, after moving beyond superstitions like chanting and herbs to real science, like bloodletting.

Boston Globe columnist Alex Beam offers with reportorial candor the past and present of McLean. If neither as artistic nor powerful as *Mount Misery*, Beam shapes extensive research into an absorbing saga braiding two overlapping histories: McLean's and psychiatry's.

No mere asylum, McLean is "a living museum... of the grand Boston culture that was...synonymous with American culture." Always prey to the hubris that provokes mass clinical depression each autumn when the Red Sox crumble, Bostonians two centuries ago called their city "the Athens of America" and felt humiliated that Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York had hospitals for mental patients while Boston could only quarantine or offer outpatient care. In 1817, with trustees including John and John Quincy Adams, Charlestown (later McLean) Hospital opened its doors.

After Massachusetts legislator Horace Mann, in 1828, urged opening a taxpayer-supported asylum for the poor, McLean quickly became elite. The astoundingly affluent could stash a vexing relative under the virtuous coloration of great financial sacrifice for his care. As Bergman's novel phrased it, "out of mind, out of sight."

Beam provides intriguing patient histories. Stanley McCormick, who entered McLean in 1906 with the perplexing diagnosis "Manic-depressive? Dementia praecox? Fixed ideas?" was the son of Cyrus McCormick, who'd reaped by then one of America's largest fortunes. Eventually, Stanley acquired a staff unto himself, with one doctor making \$150,000 a year.

McLean "alumni" constitute an impressive list of American creativity: poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton; *Girl Interrupted* author Susanna Kaysen;

overlapping stays in the mid-1960s by Ray Charles and James Taylor; and quite possibly—the records are obscure—psychologist William James. McLean is where in 1959 M.I.T. Nobel laureate John Forbes Nash of *A Beautiful Mind* was involuntarily committed.

McLean catered to what Lowell termed “thoroughbred mental cases.” A steward noted, “If the patient did not like the lamb we served for dinner and asked for lobster, we gave lobster.” In 1896, McLean completed arcadian five-bedroom “cottages for one patient,” which were “cottages” as a Bentley is a jalopy.

Today, McLean’s new ward, “The Pavilion,” costs \$1800 per day. But now such fees are designed to save McLean from disappearing. The mental health industry has grown—to use the kindest available word—frugal. In Anne Sexton’s era, McLean spent 40 days of evaluation before rendering a diagnosis. Now, says Beam, it’s “quick diagnoses, rapid drug prescriptions, and hopes for the best.” Follow-up visits are limited to 15 minutes. Current McLean president Dr. Bruce Cohen laments, “How can you know how somebody is doing if you don’t have time enough to ask, ‘How are you feeling? How are your relationships?’” Time enough to ask, perhaps, but not to get a useful answer.

This callous state of affairs reflects the most chilling dimension of *Gracefully Insane*. The history of psychiatry Beam relates is frequently barbaric. This is no indictment of McLean which, on the contrary, was often an oasis of humane ideology.

I recall a *Playboy* cartoon circa 1969 where a psychiatrist smacks the head of the man on his couch and snaps, “That ought to knock some sense into you!” I recall, too, how my laughter faded upon remembering what I’d just seen in one year of tolerating a doctoral program in clinical psychology.

There have been periods in the treatment of mental illness, and Beam shows them vividly, when it would seem psychiatrists took an oath: first, do grave harm.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, “father of American psychiatry” and signer of the Declaration of Independence, felt it might be therapeutic for the mentally ill to also travel in imposing circles. Rush invented the “gyrator” where patients were strapped and spun at great speed with their head away from the center to force blood into the brain.

In the 1930s, a Trenton psychiatrist pulled teeth and removed patients’ intestines to cure mental illness (one of Stanley McCormick’s astronomically priced therapists hailed this as a “remarkable achievement”). A decade later, two McLean doctors employed “hypothermia,” which “reduced the body to a near-death state by lowering the patients’ body temperature.”

The rage at mid-20th Century were various shock therapies: insulin coma, metrazol-triggered epileptic convulsions, and the perennial favorite of psychiatrists, who have scarcely a clue how it works, electroconvulsive shock, the treatment that allegedly prompted Sylvia Plath to a suicide attempt.

In theory at least, a patient can survive shock organically intact. Not so lobotomy. In 1935 a Portuguese physician mashed a patient's frontal lobe to break up "fixed ideas" and was nominated for a Nobel Prize. Effective in the same sense that Venus de Milo found an effective cure for hangnails, lobotomy caught on. It inspired limited enthusiasm at McLean, but 14 patients, all women, were lobotomized there in 1947. Nationwide, twice as many women were lobotomized as men.

The human mind reveals its mysteries grudgingly, thus our still dim understanding and often bizarre ways of trying to heal it. Last year, the *Harvard Mental Health Newsletter* conceded, "Researchers are still in the dark about schizophrenia." From the "demonically possessed" charges of the Dark Ages to the question mark diagnosis of Stanley McCormick to today's "borderline personality disorder" (a label so amorphous that only those with no personality whatsoever can feel certain they escape it), we grope in this field where McLean was long among the most solicitous.

That's what drew Beam to it. Knowing our human need for shelter, Beam felt, "Who could fail to be interested in a place that offered that shelter?" Like *Mount Misery*, then, this is the work of a writer with a mind active and a heart awake.