BOOK REVIEW

THE MESMERIST - The Society Doctor Who Held Victorian London Spellbound

By Wendy Moore

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This fascinating and thoroughly researched book details an important and significant twenty year period in the turbulent history of hypnosis, portrayed against a backdrop of an equally eventful time for 19th century medicine in England. I was particularly anxious to read this book having recently researched and written about how I believe that aspects of hypnosis’s difficult early history still have a negative impact on its current acceptance and utilisation within medical, scientific and psychological circles (Entwistle, 2017). I was pleased therefore to find that Wendy Moore has been able in this book to highlight and identify the genuine medical benefits of hypnosis during those difficult years amidst its otherwise and often disreputable and quackery image of the time.

In the process Moore has managed to produce an entertaining as well as erudite and informative account of the life of London physician Dr. John Elliotson, a name well known to anyone familiar with the history of hypnosis, and the role played by him in the advocacy of hypnosis over the years 1837-1856. This is a volume that could profitably be read by all fledgling hypnosis students as well as those with established roles in clinical hypnotherapy as it contains lessons to be learnt about how professional enthusiasm can go badly awry, and genuine value and research data can become lost in the misplaced search for personal kudos.

In the first of her 12 chapters Moore introduces her topic by presenting a reconstruction, based on eye witness accounts, of an 1838 public demonstration of mesmerism (as hypnosis was still then called) by Dr. Elliotson. This took place in the lecture theatre of the recently established University College Hospital which was attached to the equally new University College London. This event was the largest of a series of similar events in which Elliotson entertained his audience with a demonstration of the power of mesmerism and of how this could be used to persuade some of his more receptive patients to act out bizarre roles and to demonstrate feats of physical effort and pain insensibility. This was to be the apotheosis of his crusade to reify to his medical colleagues and to London society in general the astounding properties and potential of hypnosis. However subsequent opinions amongst the press and the medical profession were strongly divided as to their perception of the veracity and the appropriateness of the events they witnessed on the 10th May 1838, and this ultimately led to his losing his credibility and his university post.

Chapter two takes the reader back to the birth 47 years earlier of Elliotson as the son of a druggist and chemist shop owner in the squalid, poverty ridden South London district of Southwark. From there we follow his journey towards acquiring a medical degree and becoming a qualified doctor, initially at Edinburg school of medicine and later at Guys and St Thomas’ Hospitals, followed by a second medical degree at Cambridge. Moore describes in glorious detail the nature of medical training in England at that time along with the problems Elliotson encountered in trying to secure a formal hospital post, even though such posts were unpaid, the only income coming from pupils’ fees and private patients.

This chapter also presents a wealth of well researched detail about early 19th century hospital practice and about the rivalry, between Guy’s and St Thomas Hospitals, and between individual surgeons and physicians. During this time however Elliotson was acquiring a reputation for being an impressive and innovative doctor, well regarded by his fellow medical colleagues. In the early 1820s he developed a passionate interest in phrenology, the diagnostic assessment of brain function and mental characteristics through the reading of the contours of the skull, and founded the first Phrenology Society of London in 1823. He later fell out with other believers in this field and lost interest in this obscure medical fad.

Chapter three recounts the continued problems and hurdles which Elliotson, in his early thirties, encounters with the medical establishment as he battles to achieve career enhancement, supported now by his new friend Thomas Wakley. Wakley was the founder of The Lancet the first edition of which appeared on 5th October 1823 not long after Elliotson succeeded in obtaining a senior physician post at St. Thomas’s Hospital. An important *raison d'être* for Wakely’s setting up The Lancet was as part of his avowed campaign to improve the quality of medicine and surgery in London hospitals by publishing scientific articles and research, but most powerfully by reporting example of poor medical and surgical practice, malpractice, clinical errors and bungled surgery. Because of their friendship as well as the undoubted higher ethical standards that he exhibited, Elliotson escaped the sort of opprobrium meted out to his colleagues by Wakley, and in return became an active supporter of Wakley’s campaign to clean up medicine and achieve greater transparency within the medical profession.

Although Wakley was ever on the lookout for quacks, charlatans and fraudulent medical practices, he shared with Elliotson an interest and a belief in some fringe areas of medicine. These included the diagnostic efficacy of phrenology, and the medical use of acupuncture and electric shocks, although he was not accepting of homeopathy. The Lancet in turn provided a publication route for Elliotson’s own researchers on topics such as iodine treatment for thyroid disorders, quinine for malaria and the role of pollen in the aetiology of hay-fever. Elliotson was a kind and caring doctor to his patients and an eloquent and deservedly popular lecturer and teacher to his medical students at St. Thomas’s. His lectures with their clear and comprehensive approach to medicine were regularly reproduced in The Lancet and as a result his fame and his private practice revenue grew markedly during 1828/1829 and in 1929 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society.

Subsequently Elliotson obtained a post at the[C:\london](file:///C%3A%5Clondon) newly incorporated London University (later renamed University College London, UCL) where he was subsequently was appointed Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in 1831, and his efforts brought about the opening of the North London Hospital in 1834 (later renamed University College Hospital in 1837). Elliotson’s medical reputation and social standing were now at their height and he was honoured by being elected as president of the illustrious Medical and Chirurgical Society, the forerunner of the Royal Society of Medicine.

In chapters four and five Moore recounts some of the early history of mesmerism in France before detailing Elliotson’s first encounter with mesmerism in 1829 when he invites Irish chemist Richard Chenevix to demonstrate his mesmeric skills on some of the patients at St. Thomas’s hospital. Whilst he was impressed at the pain relieving power of the technique he does not pursue this further until 1837 when he meets up with the newly arrived Baron Jules Dupotet a celebrated French mesmerist trying to establish a practice in London. Elliotson was continuing to search for some breakthrough in medicine which would replace the still prevalent practices of bleeding, cupping and leeches which remained the standard approach to all medical and psychological disorders. It is not surprising therefore that he should eager and receptive to opportunities offered by the seemingly dramatic therapeutic potential of mesmerism.

Being a senior professor and physician at UCL and UCH Elliotson was able to invite Baron Dupotet to the hospital to demonstrate his therapy on a young patient with seizures with whom Elliotson had had little clinical success. So impressed was Elliotson that he proposed further patients for the Baron including two teenage sisters, Elizabeth and Jane Okey, aged 16 and 14 respectively who initially appeared to be superbly receptive to mesmeric influence, with Elizabeth especially guaranteed to put on a (frequently bawdy) show to entertain the Baron and Elliotson’s guests. But the increasing crowds flocking to the wards and lecture theatres and the resulting hostile press caused the hospital medical committee to put a stop on a situation which had got seriously out of hand. The Baron was banned from the hospital but Elliotson by now had received enough training to allow him to working with the patients, trying to understand the nature of mesmerism which he believed to be a physical force which he could manipulate rather than a mind-directed therapy – not unlike Anton Mesmer himself.

These efforts continued into 1838 with Elliotson and his colleagues submitting UCH patients and Elizabeth Okey in particular, to more and more mesmerising sessions sometimes three or more per day, and with increasingly bizarre experiments including administering “magnetised” water to patients, and with even more outrageous outcomes including to Elizabeth make prophesies and medical diagnoses whilst in a trance. Increasing hostility was being expressed by the medical professional and even Wakley was finding it difficult to support Elliotson’s activities which were coming to dominate his time and medical practice and overwhelming the hospital facilities. It seemed also that Elizabeth Okey was becoming too overpowering and taking control of the public sessions, and even Wakley concluded that the Okey sisters had been clever and fraudulent all this time and merely duping Elliotson. By December 1838 Elliotson was obliged to resign his hospital post and his formal medical career appeared over except for his publishing the fifth edition of his well-established text book, *Human Physiology* published in 1840.

However as chapters 10 and 11 discuss, Elliotson continued to use mesmerism in his own practice and to publish pamphlets about its benefits, and was rewarded by seeing the increasing general use of mesmerism across Europe brought about in part at least by his own efforts and experiments as well as by the publicity evoked by UCH/UCL debacle. Others were encouraged to explore the value and role of mesmerism for pain relief and pre-operative anaesthesia especially James Esdaile and James Braid (credited for coining the use of the word “hypnosis”) until the advent of the chemical anaesthetics between 1846-48. These as Moore notes were not without their own adverse and serious consequences and many surgeons preferred to revert back to the relative safety of mesmerism.

In the final chapter of this fascinating book is detailed Elliotson’s return to medicine in the 1850s when he regained some of his popularity by employing a more tempered approach to the use of mesmerism in treating his patients including well-known names such as Dickens, Thackeray, and the actor/theatre manager William Macready, all of whom recognised Elliotson’s qualities and all of whom incorporated mesmerism into their writing and dramatic productions, Dickens especially. Moore concludes by bring the mesmerism/hypnosis story up to date by briefly discussing some of the acceptance problems that still today beset those of us working in hypnosis, and inevitably the still very current and internecine state/non-state debate.

All in all this proved to be an immensely interesting book both as a biography of a noted figure in the early development of hypnosis, and as a meticulously researched account of a highly significant 20 years of medical history during which two major London hospital medical schools were founded and one of the most famous of medical journals *The Lancet* began its life.