

**ON THE WRITING OF
THE INSANE: WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS**

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On the writing of the insane: with illustrations by G. Mackenzie Bacon

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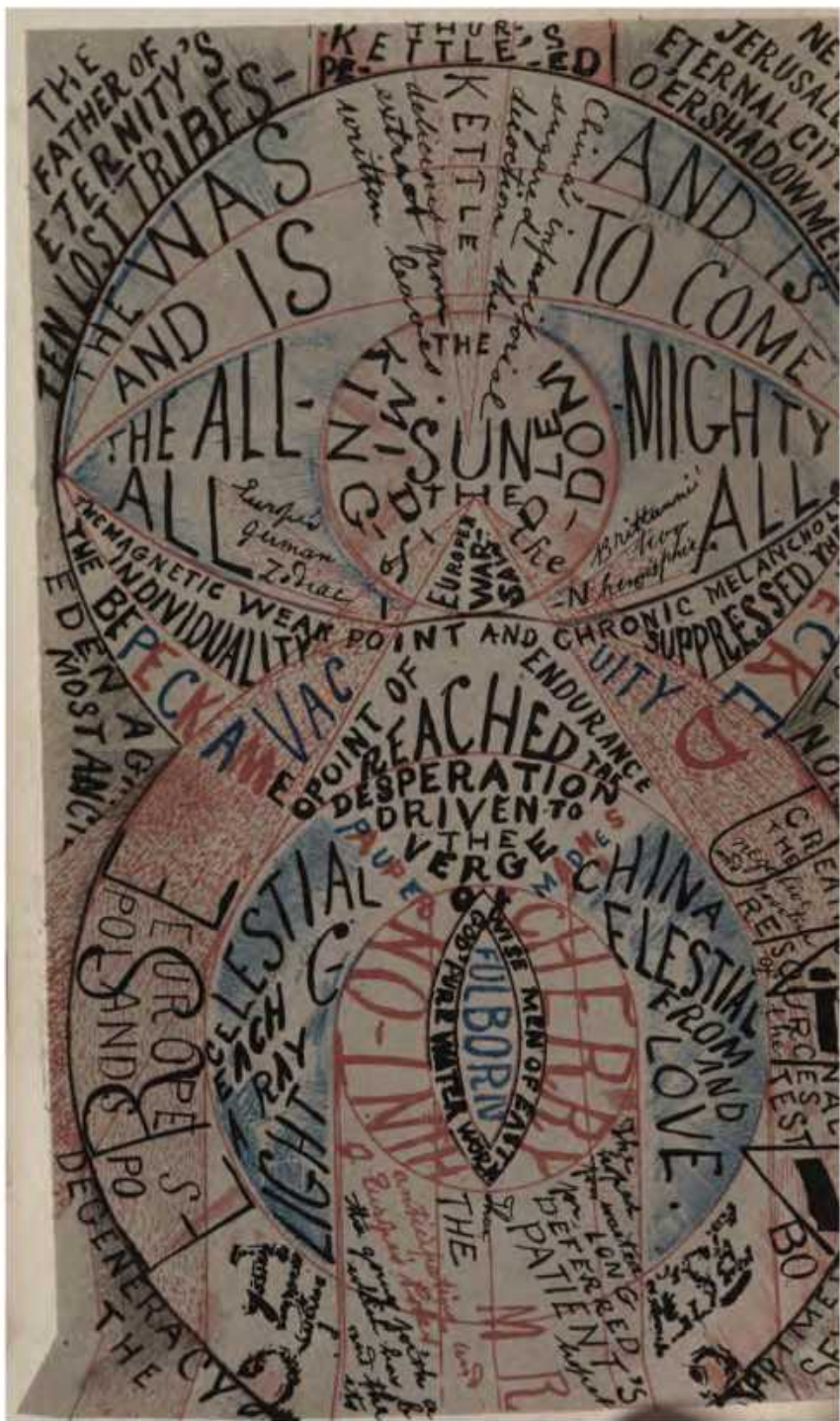
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G. MACKENZIE BACON

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THE INSANE: WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS**



ON THE
WRITING OF THE INSANE,

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

BY

G. MACKENZIE BACON, M.D.,

Medical Superintendent of the Cambridgeshire County Asylum.

"An experience of wasted energies and baffled thoughts."

Lothair,

LONDON:
JOHN CHURCHILL AND SONS,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1870.

MC

PREFACE.

THE following pages are intended merely to furnish illustrations of the writing of the insane, and not to support any particular views.

The subject of insanity is one that is practically excluded from the observation of the public, or of the bulk of the medical profession, and it is so of necessity. For this reason I think that any simple recital of facts connected with this speciality must have a certain value, even if not leading to any direct practical issue. It has been my endeavour to place before the reader a series of pictures of insane minds, painted by themselves, and it is for him to draw what lessons he may from the study of them. Looking back myself, with the aid of some years' familiar experience of the insane, on the histories of the patients who wrote the letters I have given, it seems to me that I can recognise each case in these documents, and I hope, therefore, that others may derive some useful impressions from their perusal. The cases are meant to speak for themselves, and I have avoided encumbering them with many comments. There is no particular novelty in them,

though I am not aware that any such series has been before published, and there is only one point on which I lay claim to any originality, viz.—*the diagnostic value of the handwriting in general paralysis*. I cannot find that anyone else has before called attention to the alteration the handwriting undergoes in this disease, and it strikes me as so distinctive as to demand consideration in the observation of such cases. I first noticed this subject in a few remarks in the *Lancet* of July 24th, 1869, in which paper the figures in Plate IV. appeared. In the first place I had the writing photographed on glass, and exhibited it with an ordinary magic lantern in a dark room to the medical students of the University. By this plan the irregularities in the writing, being magnified, show more clearly still. I have no wish to attribute undue importance to this matter; but it seems to me of some value in the early stages of a disease so difficult to recognise at that period. With these explanations I leave the matter to the judgment of others.

*County Asylum,
Fulbourn, near Cambridge.*

ON THE WRITING OF THE INSANE.

OF the three modes of communicating their ideas that human beings possess, viz., speech, gesture, and writing, the last one has received the least notice. Indeed, the study of hand-writing is more connected in one's mind with fortunetelling, and other forms of popular superstition or deception, than with scientific investigation; yet there is much to learn by the study of even such a common-place phenomenon. The act of writing, when once the habit has been acquired, seems so easy as to be almost intuitive, and we are apt to forget what combinations are necessary to set in motion the pen which runs so glibly over the paper, and what complicated processes are involved in so simple an act. Without dwelling on the mechanism of the hand, it will be enough to call to mind the other requisites for this mode of expression. First, the mental conception, then the volitional impulse and its transmission along the proper track, and then the muscular effort. All this implies a brain capable of originating the idea, and a sound nervous system to carry it out: and any failure in the one or the other mars the execution of the purpose. For instance, certain changes in the brain would alter the modes of expression, showing an incoherency or perversion of idea, or disease in the nervous track might debar a person from expressing the idea really formed and substitute another, or certain muscular defects might impair the execution of the

purpose, making the written words shaky or badly formed, &c. So much is self-evident to any one giving the subject any reflection, and these considerations tend to show that the writing of a person may deserve a two-fold study—as to the subject-matter, and the method of execution. From either point of view the writing may, then, have its psychological value, whether a person be sane or insane, and serve as an indication of character, of health, or of disease. Most people are sensible of the force of this indication, though some are far better interpreters of it than others. Writing is, of course, the direct reflection of a person's mind, except in cases where there is a deliberate purpose to mislead or conceal, and from its permanence is sometimes more valuable than the fleeting impression produced by actions or spoken language.

My present object is merely to speak of the value of the study of the writing of the insane, and that in a two-fold aspect, viz., the subject-matter and the manner in which it is conveyed, that is to say, the hand-writing.

There is a popular notion that the insane are a very wily and cunning class, and require to be approached with a certain amount of suspicion and caution, in order to fathom their motives or even discover their weaknesses; but those who live amongst the insane know well how little such notions are supported by facts. The vast majority of the insane, indeed, are unconscious in what way they differ from the rest of the world, and have, therefore, nothing to conceal. Few of them indeed would be able to carry out any system of deception. Still, there are some who will resort to such devices, when they will put a certain constraint on their words and conceal their real thoughts; but this is a difficult part to play, and one that they seldom perform with success. Indeed, most of such patients escape from this unnatural position by relieving their feelings in writing, and then the

productions of their pen have an unusual value. Dryden relates of Nathaniel Lee that the latter, in reply to some bad poet, who observed that it was very easy to write like a madman, made this shrewd remark:—" *It is very difficult to write like a madman, but it is very easy to write like a fool.*"

It is not necessary that I should here define "the insane," as I only refer to a class recognised as such, and do not want to dwell on any disputed cases. The line must be drawn somewhere between the sane and insane for purposes of public convenience, but such a boundary mark has but little value to medical men, who have to look at people's minds and nervous systems as they are, without much reference to an ideal standard of mental health or capacity. Indeed, the habit of regarding society as divided into two camps, the sane and insane, more or less opposed to one another, is a very mischievous one, as well as being founded in error, for it is those who occupy the neutral ground that it concerns the physician to know, still more than it does those already ticketed as insane. There is a large class of persons, particularly among women, of limited mental capacity, and of unstable nervous power, whose ailments are very closely related to the condition called insanity, and who ought to be studied *clinically* in that category; yet to call such people mad is to unsettle all existing systems of nomenclature. The great majority of cases in any large public Asylum is composed of people who have permanent delusions, or are more or less sunk in dementia; and the mental state of such patients is easily recognised and defined; but there are always a good many others of feeble mind and with little power of will, and without any special perversion of intellect, whose condition hardly differs from the "nervous" and hysterical or susceptible people that exist free in the world. This intermediate class deserves especial study, and forms, as it were,