

A Historical Dictionary of Psychiatry

by Edward Shorter, Ph.D. Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 2005,
338 pages, \$49.95.

I've a confession (well, two). I've a weakness for dictionaries, and I love to read history. So any claim to objectivity in this review is henceforth renounced, and I shall be perfectly happy to share with you why I keep turning back to Dr. Shorter's little book and why it has spent 6 months circulating on my desk-top, bedside, and computer table rather than finding a place among its peers in the office library.

Edward Shorter, a professor of the history of medicine at the University of Toronto, has a particular interest in the development of psychiatry. In the brief introduction to the dictionary, he outlines 3 broad phases of modern psychiatric practice: the asylum period (1770–1870), the psychoanalytic period (1870–1970), and the pharmacologic period (1970–present). Shorter sees our current era as the renaissance of the biological view of psychiatric illness, in which the biomedical models of illness that typified the asylum period have gained a new footing via molecular and genetic studies that have led to effective pharmacologic treatments.

The dictionary is arranged in customary alphabetical fashion, with a variety of entries, including persons, diseases, medications, schools of thought, and schools proper (including hospitals used as such). The descriptions given to each entry range from a half page to several pages and are generally in succinct prose. For instance, the term *melancholia* is explained to have originated with classical Greek physicians. Next, early quotations from Timothy Bright, John Haslam, Phillippe Pinel, and William Cullen are cited, showing how the term changed in later usage. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is quoted extensively. The term's decline in usage is noted, as well as its rehabilitation by Karl Leonhard and its subsequent inclusion in the DSM system. The entries give just enough to titillate the interested learner, who can go for lengths of playing "connect-the-dots" with trains of thought, word origins, and conceptual nosology.

But who reads dictionaries? Well—me. And medical students, psychiatry residents, generalists who want to know more about psychiatry, and students of the panorama that is the history of medicine. Desktop, bedside, computer table—find a place for Shorter's historical dictionary, and it will stay there for some time to come.

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