



James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938)

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James Crichton-Browne was born on November 29, 1840, at his mother's family home, 3 St John's Hill, Edinburgh, close to the University [8]. He was given his second name, Crichton, to mark the munificence of Mrs Elizabeth Crichton, who had given £100,000 to found an asylum at Dumfries in 1839, and was chosen as his godmother [7]. His mother, Magdalene Howden Balfour, possessed a wide literary knowledge and came from a family of scientists, while his father, Dr William Alexander Francis Browne (1805–1885), one of the most prominent medical psychologists in Scotland at the time, was the physician-superintendent of the Crichton Royal Institution at Dumfries. Unsurprisingly many notable figures in medicine, science and literature were frequent guests in Browne's home. This cultured intellectual and literary atmosphere strongly influenced the young minds of James and his brothers, William—who died in 1846, aged 11—and John Hutton Balfour Browne, who became the eminent King's Counsel and leader of the Parliamentary Bar [8].

Crichton-Browne spent much of his youth at the Crichton Royal Hospital, where he became accustomed to the lifestyle of an asylum. In 1857, at the age of 17, he was already determined to adopt his father's profession so he went to the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated with honours in medicine in 1862, with a thesis on 'Hallucinations' [7–10]. Among his many renowned teachers were Joseph Lister (1827–1912), Sir James Young Simpson (1811–1870), John Goodsir (1814–1868) and Thomas Laycock (1812–1876), this last being his magister-hero [10], "the ablest and most suggestive of the medical professors" [6; pp. 20–1]. After Edinburgh, Crichton-Browne continued his studies in Paris, like his father in the early 1830s, where he received further

medical education in the practice of performing autopsies on psychiatric patients [2, 10].

After training as an assistant medical officer in several asylums, he was appointed a medical superintendent of the new Borough Asylum in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1865 (according to The National Archives), whose patients numbered 54 on opening. After 1 year, when he was only 26, Crichton-Browne was promoted to head the larger West Riding Asylum in Wakefield, housing nearly 1400 patients, where he worked as a medical director for 10 years [2]. Crichton-Browne made the Wakefield Asylum a model, not only for its administration and for the humane methods of treatment, but also for his trailblazing idea to join therapy with investigation into the pathology of mental and nervous diseases. Indeed, as a lecturer on mental diseases at Leeds Medical School and through publishing regularly in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet*, he realized a true transformation in the field, by integrating neurological and psychiatric research with traditional clinical work [10]. To do this, he personally examined about 1500 brains to understand the role of brain abnormalities, established a research laboratory in neurophysiology, and published the outcomes of his own research and those of other researchers in the annual *West Riding Asylum Medical Reports*. Six volumes appeared between 1871 and 1876, each with 10–15 monographs [2, 3]. The contributors, mostly from the West Riding Asylum, included David Ferrier (1843–1928) whose experiments on cerebral localization, performed on dogs and monkeys, were undertaken at Wakefield [3]. In 1878, the asylum's *Medical Reports* served as the precursor to *Brain: a Journal of Neurology*, cofounded and coedited by Crichton-Browne [9].

In his decade of research at the West Riding Asylum, Crichton-Browne observed that the weight of the brain was reduced in the insane, with alterations also in lateral ventricles and in the left temporal lobe. As he wrote in 1879: "It seemed not improbable that the cortical centres which are last organised, which are most highly evolved and voluntary, and which are located on the left side of the brain, might suffer first in insanity" [4]. He reconciled phrenological and

Link to The National Archives: <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/1c46a34c-cb7f-43be-9c0d-3a44b21d270a>.

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evolutionary views—primarily resulting from the influence of his father and Laycock - with emphasis on the importance of brain functional asymmetry [5].

He was also a pioneer in adopting clinical photography. Charles Darwin used one of the 40 pictures Crichton-Browne sent him when illustrating *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). They also corresponded from May 1869 until December 1875 and Darwin nominated Crichton-Browne as a Fellow of the Royal Society, a position that he obtained in 1883 [2], the year after Darwin's death [9, 10].

In 1876, Crichton-Browne was appointed Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy, a position he embraced to support the needs of the mentally afflicted in Great Britain. This required him to move to London. In his role as Chancellor, which he maintained until 1922, he was strongly focused on mental health education, an issue in which he was particularly engaged since being a student [2, 8, 10]. Conservative and a devout Episcopalian, he paid special attention to the early stages of human beings, from mother's own health to a correct mixture of brain- and hand-work [8], sometimes with conventional prejudices [10]. Thanks to his broad medical outlook, Crichton-Browne promoted the campaign for the open-air treatment of tuberculosis, the hygienic control of venereal disease and, in 1898, he addressed the rising public health issue of dental hygiene and the need for early interventions [1].

Thanks to his appearance,—he was one of the last to wear bushy sideburns (Fig. 1)—his eloquence and authority he soon become a leading and influential society figure in the city. In 1886 he was created a Knight Bachelor by Queen Victoria and, among the other honours, he was President of the Medico-Psychological Association (1878), the Neurological Society (1888) and the Medical Society of London (1895) [8]. He married twice, first in 1865 to Emily Halliday (who died in 1903) and then in 1912 to Audrey Emily Bulwer. During his last years, Crichton-Browne wrote a long (5 volumes) autobiography [7]. He died on 31 January 1938 at Crindau, Dumfries, from heart failure, at age 97 years [8].

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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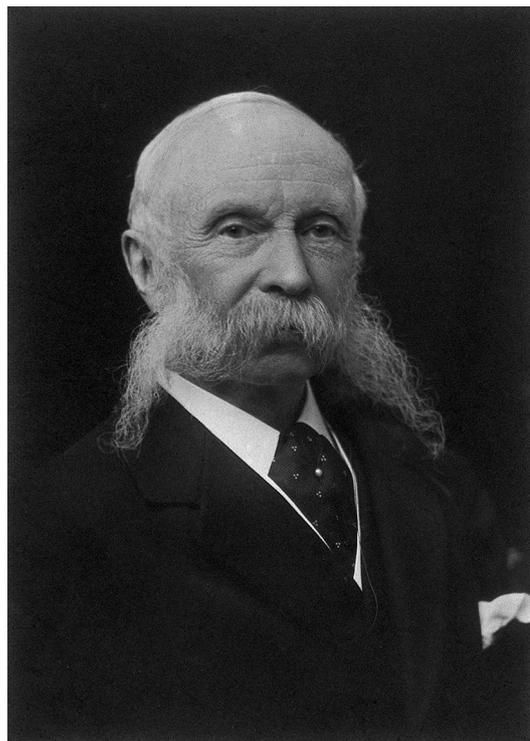


Fig. 1 James Crichton-Browne. (Credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY)

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