Bell(wether) of Psychiatry

By Walter E. Barton, M.D.

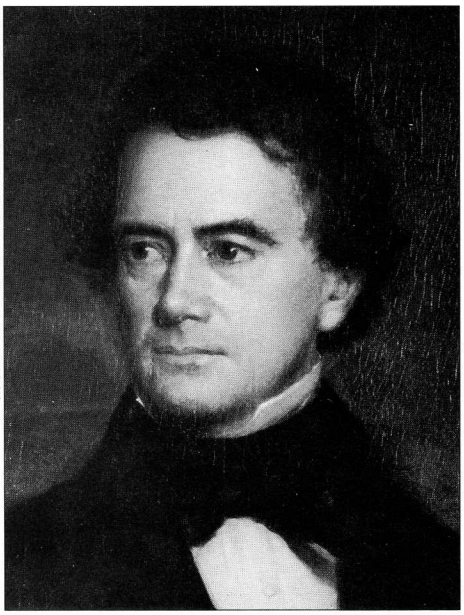
Luther Bell, an 1826 graduate of DMS, was one of the founding fathers of psychiatry and a leader in establishing the precepts of the specialty.

When Luther Bell came to study medicine at Dartmouth in the 1820s, he was not yet 20 and the course of medical instruction was barely 25 years old. But the youthful program provided young Bell with a background strong enough to forge a place in medical history. A founder of the oldest national medical organization in the United States, he is remembered for his leadership in shaping the emerging profession of psychiatry and in influencing the care of the mentally ill.

Dr. Bell was an outstanding clinician, an able administrator, an expert in medicolegal matters, an authority on heating and ventilation for hospitals, and an adviser to social reformer Dorothea Dix.

Luther V. Bell was born in Francestown, N.H., on December 20, 1806, into a distinguished family. His grandfather had been a New Hampshire state senator, and his father, Samuel, Dartmouth class of 1793, served in both houses of the New Hampshire legislature, as governor and chief justice of New Hampshire, and as a U.S. senator. One brother, Samuel, became chief justice of New Hampshire; another brother, John, was a professor of anatomy at the University of Vermont; and his brother James was a U.S. senator.

Luther entered Bowdoin College a few months before his 13th birthday and graduated in 1823. Among his fellow students and close associates in college were Franklin Pierce, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry Longfellow. He then began the study of medicine at Dartmouth.



COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF MCLEAN HOSPITAL

Luther Bell, DMS 1826, as depicted in an 1857 portrait painted by Moses Wight.

When Nathan Smith founded the medical school at Hanover in 1797, the curriculum consisted of one series of lectures delivered between August and December, and Dr. Smith constituted the entire faculty.

By 1811 a medical education building had been constructed on the Dartmouth campus, and just a few years before Bell arrived in Hanover the medical faculty was enlarged and organized into four separate chairs: anatomy and physiology; theory and practice of physic, materia medica, and botany; surgery, obstetrics, and medical jurisprudence; and chemistry, mineralogy, and the application of science to the arts.

However, the Medical School still had no hospital and provided no training in the specialties. All graduates were general practitioners. The course of didactic instruction was followed by practical experience gained as an apprentice under the preceptorship of a faculty member or a practitioner elsewhere.

After Dr. Bell graduated from Dartmouth, in 1826, he practiced for a short time in Brunswick and for six years in Derry, N.H. During this period, he served in the New Hampshire legislature and participated in founding the state asylum in Concord. During his years in general practice, Dr. Bell also wrote a dissertation on dietetics that won Boston's Boylston Prize in medicine. In the paper, he opposed the vegetarian diet of Sylvester Graham and advocated a substantial and nutritious diet for the New England laborer. In succeeding years he wrote other papers, including one on smallpox and one on "External Exploration of Diseases."

When he was invited in 1837 to become superintendent of McLean Asylum for the Insane (later McLean Hospital), Dr. Bell accepted the position. McLean, a prestigious institution associated with Massachusetts General Hospital and located in Somerville, had been founded in 1818 as the first asylum for the insane in the northern United States. The asylum, though private, served the entire Boston community. Those who couldn't pay for their care had their expenses paid from the endowment. Later, when pressure for admission increased, the number admitted was limited to what the endowment could support.

Dr. Bell proved to be an outstanding administrator as well as an excellent clinician, and he served with distinction at McLean until 1856. At the time of his resignation, the number of patients had trebled and several new buildings had been constructed. During his nearly two decades of service 2,696 patients were treated, 62 percent of them successfully.

In 1840, three years after he took over at McLean, Dr. Bell went to Europe to update his knowledge of the care of the mentally ill. He reported on his experiences in McLean's annual report for the year 1841.

Dr. Barton is an active emeritus professor of psychiatry at DMS. Author of a recently-published book, The History and Influence of the American Psychiatric Association *(see the "Books" section in this issue), he is past president, former medical director, and a 50-year life fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He has also been president of the American Board of Psychiatry, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, and the American College of Mental Health Administration.*

Dr. Bell had developed a program that involved treatment of his patients as rational individuals capable of modifying their behavior. In shaping this view, he was following the belief in the healing powers of nature as described by Benjamin Rush in his book *Medical Inquiries and Observations of the Mind.* Published in 1812, Rush's book was the dominant authority in the field for more than 50 years. Bell, however, rejected the bleeding, blistering, and purging therapies advocated by Rush. Instead, while accepting the physical origins of mental disease, he placed reliance on close personal attention and moral treatment. Moral therapy consisted of kindly, compassionate care in a structured environment. It employed rewards and sanctions to motivate patients to follow a schedule that balanced work and rest. The goal was the development of inner control of behavior.

In addition, Dr. Bell treated patients as individuals. Though he devoted much of his writing to developing classifications of patients, he found that under even the most elaborate classification system peculiarities were still attached to each case.

To his treatment of patients as rational beings, not the deranged animals they were viewed as by many of his contemporaries, Dr. Bell brought rare qualities of mind and character — he was sympathetic, skilled, patient, and inspiring of confidence. He also brought to his work considerable scientific capabilities for the day. A biographical sketch published shortly after his death noted that Dr. Bell adhered to a "standard of true science . . . he felt and inquired his way on with equal confidence and caution."

In the fall of 1844, the hard-working superintendent from McLean rode off to take a place in the history of psychiatry. He joined 12 other superintendents of insane asylums for a four-day meeting in Philadelphia to form the first national medical society in the country. Then called the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, this organization would later become the American Psychiatric Association. The charming and outspoken Dr. Bell has been described as "one of the most outstanding" of the founding group and went on to assume a leadership role as the organization developed.

In 1846, Dr. Bell went to Europe again to survey mental institutions and study the latest treatment methods there. He used the knowledge he gained on this trip to assist in the founding of and to prepare the entire plans for the Butler State Hospital in Providence, R.I.

During this period, Bell was also active in the Massachusetts Medical Society. In 1848, he delivered an address to the group on "Practical Methods of Ventilating Buildings," advocating the use of steam to warm the intake of air to improve ventilation in institutional heating systems. He later served, from 1857 to 1859, as president of the society.

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The political arena also benefited from his talents. He served on the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Council and on the Commission for Pardons; he was a working member of the State Constitutional Convention in 1853; and he ran unsuccessfully for Congress as a candidate of the Whig Party in 1852.

It was during this stage in his career that he also acquired stature as a medicolegal expert. He worked to establish a better jurisprudence for the care and treatment of the insane in New England and frequently was called into court to give expert testimony on insanity.

Dr. Bell also contributed significantly during these years to the nascent psychiatric association. He served on committees involving medical treatment, the use of restraints, the construction of hospitals, support of the pauper insane, and insane prisoners. His leadership skills led to his serving as president of the association from 1851 to 1855. During the period of his leadership, he was able to aid the association in becoming politically effective. Using this talent, he also established himself as an adviser to Dorothea Dix, America's greatest social reformer, in her crusade for humane care of the mentally ill.

Dr. Bell displayed considerable originality and independence of thought throughout his career, and he freely expressed his opinions, even if they were unpopular, in meetings of the Association of Medical Superintendents. He opposed the use of long statistical tables in hospital annual reports as unreliable and misleading; he himself used instead a narrative approach, honed by his capacity for original observation and scientific discrimination. He favored limited use of restraints for violent patients. He favored model commitment laws and with his friend Isaac Ray developed standards for the admission of patients to hospitals. And he opposed the use of coercive practices in institutions for the insane.

He was also one of the few asylum superintendents who believed in phrenology. While president of the association, in 1854, he delivered a poorly-received address on "Spiritual Manipulation."

Dr. Bell's forthrightness on another subject caused him to be estranged from his colleague John Galt. In 1855, he opposed Dr. Galt's advocacy of alternatives to hospital care as practiced in France (decentralized units) and in Belgium (family care). Galt wrote that New England institutions were "mere prisons" and some members of the profession, meaning Dr. Bell, "mere tinkers of gas pipes."

But not all of Dr. Bell's proclamations were controversial. At the association's annual meeting in 1849, he read a paper on acute mania associated with high fever and leading to stupor. For years this syndrome was called "Bell's Disease."

Dr. Bell resigned from his post at McLean in 1856, for reasons of failing health — pulmonary

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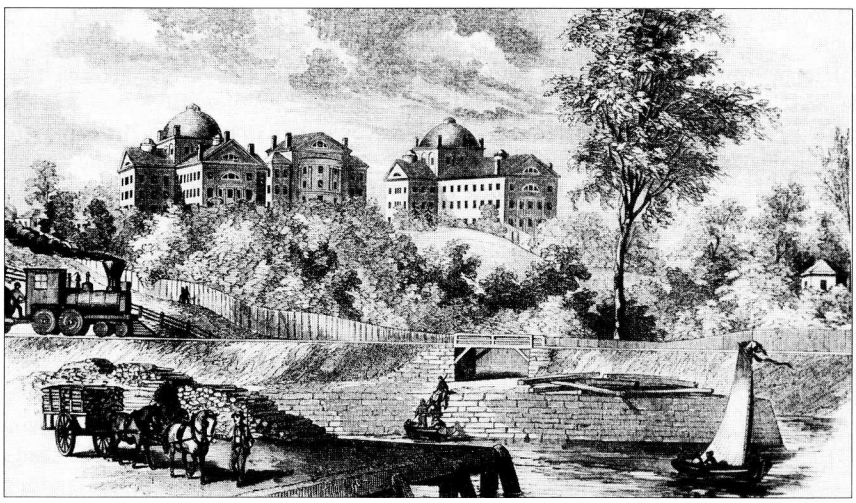

COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF MCLEAN HOSPITAL

This view of the McLean Asylum, from the period of Dr. Bell's tenure there, is an artist's rendition that appeared in Gleason's Pictorial *of May 14, 1853.*

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disease, compounded by general exhaustion from his years of exacting service. During his term at McLean, despite his professional success, he had experienced many personal disappointments, including the death of his wife and three of his seven children.

For most of the next five years, he lived in Charlestown, Mass. A little more than a year after his resignation, he was pressed back into temporary service as superintendent at McLean, due to the untimely death of his successor. Other than that, he continued his consultation and court practice as his health permitted. Among other activities during this period, he superintended the erection of a state insane asylum in Northampton, Mass.

When the Civil War began, Dr. Bell considered it his duty to assist in the Union effort, and he joined up in 1861 as surgeon to the 11th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment. He was soon advanced to the post of division medical commander in General Hooker's Army of the Potomac.

Dr. Bell's own illness, though not totally incapacitating, was not unchecked during his final years. Early in February of 1862, he was struck in camp by a severe attack of pulmonary distress, and his distinguished career came to an end on February 11, 1862. He was 55.

He had received an honorary degree in civil laws from King's College in Nova Scotia in 1847 and a doctorate of laws from Amherst in 1855.

One of Dr. Bell's successors at McLean, in the annual report of 1863, wrote: "His active and commanding intellect; his extraordinary attainments as a scholar, philosopher, and psychologist; his extensive knowledge of everything pertaining to the phenomena, management, and history of insanity . . . have justly caused him to be regarded as one of the most distinguished of the many great men who ever adorned the medical profession." □