

# British Upper-Class Complex Trauma Syndrome: The Case of Charles Rycroft, Psychoanalyst and Psychotherapist

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‘We start at the less severe end of what appears to be a spectrum of related syndromes’

(Bowlby, ‘On knowing what you are not supposed to know and feeling what you are not supposed to feel’, 1988, p. 113)

Charles Rycroft (1914–1998) was one of the most original of the generation of British psychoanalysts – though latterly he thought of himself more broadly simply as a ‘psychotherapist’ – who entered the embryonic profession just after the war.

Through his writings<sup>1</sup> and journalism he brought the still novel ideas inspired by Freud and, to a lesser extent, Jung, to a wide British and North American public; in many ways he then transcended them. By the 1970s and 80s he was widely known and recognized in psychoanalytic and intellectual circles on both sides of the Atlantic. A recent Special Issue of *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (70(2)), re-evaluating him, in its guest editorial described his writing as ‘brilliant’ (Borgogno, 2010).

Yet, the memorial *Festschrift* (2004), edited by his widow and second wife Jenny Pearson, which I have just reread, revealed that behind the urbane upper-class exterior lay a troubled man who in some way felt he did not fulfil his full potential despite his therapeutic and literary achievements. I want to explore the reasons for this lack of fulfilment from the perspective of his early familial and boarding school environment, at times drawing on my lengthy

The unattributed page numbers in the text refer to *Analyst of the Imagination: The Life and Work of Charles Rycroft*, edited by Jenny Pearson.

time as an analysand, my somewhat similar social origins, and my hindsight as a boarding school survivor (I will break with the convention typical of boarding schools and refer to most of my personae by their familiar first name). Charles only hints at this in the disquieting disclaimer in the introduction to his autobiographical essay 'Where I came from' (Rycroft, 1985, p. 198): '... it contains *no* reference to the traumas, griefs, conflicts and confusions that were the inevitable price of *coming from where I came from*' (my emphasis).

Charles grew up in a conventional country gentry family in the small village of Dummer near Basingstoke, Hampshire, locating himself socially with telling precision as 'lower upper class' (Holmes, 1996, p. 726). His father was the 5th Baronet and his mother was related to the First Viscount Halifax, one time Chancellor of the Exchequer – as he said himself, he was 'well connected' (1985, pp. 199–200). As was the custom in this social class, the young Charles and his three siblings were 'distanced' from their parents, being looked after by a nursery nurse, nursemaids, and servants. According to his sister Alice, father was more accessible than mother, who 'never came to the nursery to play with us'<sup>2</sup> (p. 194). Charles' world was circumscribed by Dummer House, the large and beautiful country house they lived in, their estate and its farms, and the nearby village, which his father virtually owned. This idyllic country setting, where his father was the well-known Master of Hounds, was ruptured when he was sent off to Durnford boarding prep school<sup>3</sup> on the so-called Isle of Purbeck in Dorset at the age of eight in 1922.

For Charles, this does not seem to have been too much of a conscious shock.<sup>4</sup> The only reference I can find that he makes to it is a very fleeting one in 'Where I came from': 'When I was eight, I was sent to a fashionable and rather enlightened prep school in Dorset, where my brother had preceded me' (1985, p. 202).

However, by chance, Durnford happens to be 007 author Ian Fleming's old prep school, and his biographer, Ben Macintyre vividly describes Durnford as a 'traditionally brutal prep school [which] epitomises the strange British faith in bad food, plenty of Latin and beatings from an early age' (2008). Its headmaster, Thomas Pellatt, wrote up his reminiscences (1936), revealing a Spartan regime, including early morning nude sea bathing for the boys. What is well documented is the way Pellatt broke the news of Rycroft's father's death to him, aged eleven, while at school and how it was dealt with.

Harold Bourne, a friend from his early days of medical training in the 1940s, says in 'The innocence of Charles Rycroft' (pp. 164–191) that Pellatt summoned him to tell him of his father's death and then told him to go back to his classroom and get on with his schoolwork! Enlightened? His sister Alice reveals more:

Mother asked the headmaster at Durnford to tell Charles, which he did. He didn't come home. For several nights he went to bed feeling absolutely terrible, but he didn't want to cry because he was in a dormitory and felt the other boys would laugh at him.

She adds, 'It did him lots of harm, I am sure, tied him in knots mentally. He was only just eleven, and he wasn't even a very grown up eleven: he was still a little boy'<sup>5</sup> (p. 196).

Further, the children were not allowed to attend their father's funeral, and no one ever talked to them about his death. As if this was not bad enough, on top of everything they had to move out of their house because the title and the estate were inherited by their much older half-brother from father's first marriage. They ended up in the dower house of a castle in the family of a distant cousin in Essex, comparatively lacking both money and status.

By any standards, the young Rycrofts and their mother had suffered a multiple loss of traumatic proportions. Charles describes his mother in retrospect as 'for much of my teens and her forties . . . "clinically depressed"' (1985, p. 202). What we do not have in the autobiographical fragment (interestingly, he refused to write an autobiography despite pleas from Jenny and publishers) is any clear indication of how Charles negotiated this troubled time, though I think the initial shock is movingly captured by his sister, Alice. Jenny refers to a 'history of childhood loss within a privileged setting [which] may well have had some bearing on Charles' paradoxical nature' (p. 200). I think we must see this as a typical English understatement. But it is Harold Bourne in the *Festschrift*, informed in part by his very different London East End Anglo-Jewish provenance, who makes the most sustained effort to grapple with the 'paradox'.

It is Harold's contention that Charles was not just a revisionist of Freudian meta-psychology but, in his work and writings, offered a potential 'radical reconstruction of psychoanalysis', yet he failed to convince the psychoanalytic community of this radicalism, instead 'strategically' withdrawing from its dominant British institution, the Institute of Psychoanalysis (the practical arm of the then hyphenated British Psycho-Analytical Society founded by Freud's Welsh disciple, Ernest Jones, in 1919). He locates this lack of nerve in 'rage against the English social order, opposed to and not quite quelled by an intense and reparative identification with it' (p. 167). He pinpoints its genesis at the news of his father's death at Durnford school in 1925, and goes on to say that this 'was the beginning of a deep anger and revolt against the proprieties and order of the English social world' (p. 168). That rings true to me, though it would be more accurate to describe it as 'the *upper class* English social world'.

Can we link this 'deep anger and revolt' to Charles' subsequent interest in psychoanalysis? I think we can, because Charles himself sees 'that in the 1930s Freudian psychoanalysis was regarded as deeply subversive' (p. 242). Initially, psychoanalysis and the Institute seemed to be the safe haven he was seeking, but things began to fall apart for a number of reasons. First, Ella Sharpe, his initial training analyst, apparently wedded to standard infantile sexual explanations, failed to appreciate and interpret his encompassing grief and anger

due to post-Oedipal losses,<sup>6</sup> he had arrived in the Institute at a time when it was riven, after Freud's death as an exile in Hampstead, by the dispute between followers of his daughter Anna (swelled by refugees from Hitler) and Melanie Klein (who had arrived in London earlier), a conflict which, for Charles, looked all too like that of a dysfunctional family (Holmes, 1996, p. 732), and last, with an upper-class 'self-confidence', being independent-minded and intelligent, he was starting to develop ideas of his own about the nature of psychic life, which, as Harold has pointed out, radically diverged from the more abstract, 'Continental' thinking of the original Freudians or Kleinians.

Harold's case against Charles is that he declined the challenge to radically transform British psychoanalysis when the prospect of becoming President of the Institute was well within his grasp. As he admitted in the Jeremy Holmes interview:

... I do remember thinking, I shan't be able to prevent people making me President. At some point, it was bound to happen, particularly as at one time the refugee community, on the whole, took the view that they were guests of the British Society and therefore shouldn't throw their weight around too much. (Holmes, 1996, p. 732)

It seems indisputable that, in a sense, Charles walked away from the Institute when he might have played a commanding role in it. In Harold's view, an exaggerated 'reparative impulse' intervened at the prospect of this institutional upheaval, 'covertly sabotaging your own invaluable contributions so that (British) psychoanalysis can go safely bumbling along unchanged' (p. 178).

In my opinion this irreducible reluctance can be elucidated if we apply the explanatory insights of 'upper-class and/or boarding school complex trauma syndrome' to the psychic dilemmas of someone of Charles's social status – and I say this from hard-won personal knowledge as well as conceptual reflection. The 'paradox of privilege' was not really explicitly addressed until Nick Duffell, a psychotherapist outside the mainstream psychoanalytic tradition,<sup>7</sup> got to grips with the psychological sequelae of being sent off to boarding school at six, seven, or eight, which is explored in his path-breaking book, *The Making of Them* (2000). Nick describes the 'paradox' in this way:

[The boarding school survivor] is convinced that there will be little sympathy because it happened in an institution of privilege, because his parents are wealthy enough to have chosen that for him ... what a 'lucky boy' he was, how many advantages there were, how anyone in their right mind would give their right arm to get there ... how dare he complain, either then or later in life? If he did he would be ungrateful, and a wimp to boot ... This perverse paradox is very hard to deal with, and is a lasting problem for the survivor. (p. 55)

Effective protest is almost impossible in this context of 'privilege' without therapy assistance aware of the syndrome's physio-psychological implications. But, as John Bowlby pointed out in *Attachment* (1971), there is often, due to failure or a premature rupture of familial attachment, a further complication in that the 'institution', usually after initial reluctance, of necessity comes to stand for the primary attachment figure who has had to be abandoned or is absent. 'A school or college, a work group, a religious group or a political group can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment-"figure", and for some people a principal attachment-"figure" (p. 255).

This can explain the extraordinary tenacity of allegiance to boarding school institutions (and subsequent institutions, psychoanalytic institutes not excluded), providing fuel for the self-cancelling 'rage and reparative identification' pinpointed by Harold.

Sadly, there is testimony from the children of his first marriage (there was none from the second) that Charles' anger was not solely focused on the institutional home of the Institute, but was also expressed inside his family and marriages. His daughter Catherine Merriman, the novelist and writer, recalls:

As a child, unless some physical activity or an actual conversation was taking place, I could quickly sense his engagement with me fading. At one time this could be quite frightening, because he would go into his 'silent rage' mode, turning red in the face and jingling the change in his pocket. (p. 214)

This is confirmed by his other daughter Julia and son Frank. Such lack of affect control and physiological hyper-arousal are now well recognized as one of the effects of trauma (though perhaps we can see the 'change jingling' as a sort of non-verbal warning, at least to nearest and dearest).

There is also evidence from the children of how hard he found it to engage with them in a continuing and intimate way. His son Frank recorded with regret that 'I can never point to moments of deep father/son connection. Our relationship always felt somehow formal' (p. 219) There is plenty of evidence in Nick's book that this sort of 'failure of intimacy' – which I can corroborate – is typical of what he calls the 'strategic survival personality' engendered by the detachment within the upper class family and reinforced by the premature separation from primary care-givers demanded by boarding prep school.

Looking back on their marriage in an honest and moving way, Jenny's assessment was that Charles was for much of his life in search for a

... woman who would always 'be there' for him, supplying the continuity that was missing from his childhood ... It is my impression that none of the three analysts succeeded in meeting his need at a level that might have laid to rest or brought it within manageable range. (pp. 223–224)

She recalls a conversation with Charles in which he said with a sigh, 'Himself he could not save' (p. 224). We are forced to conclude that conventional psychoanalysis failed to get to grips with Charles' early trauma. Why?

In her pioneering book, *Trauma and Recovery* (2001), trauma therapist and expert Judith Herman lays it on the line, 'Traumatic syndromes cannot be properly treated if they are not diagnosed'. She elaborates:

With patients who have suffered prolonged, repeated trauma, the matter of diagnosis is not nearly so straightforward. Disguised presentations are common in *complex* post-traumatic stress disorder . . . with (such) survivors it is particularly important to name the complex post trauma disorder and to explain the personality deformations which occur . . . While patients with simple post-traumatic stress disorder fear they are losing their minds, patients with the complex disorder often feel they have lost themselves. The question of what is wrong with them has often become hopelessly muddled and ridden with moral judgment. (pp. 156–157, my emphasis)

While some boarders do indeed suffer from acute trauma due to actual physical, sexual, or mental abuse (brilliantly conveyed in the More4 TV documentary *Chosen*<sup>8</sup>), for most the effects of prolonged rupture or denial of intimate and sympathetic contact falls into a systemic 'complex' category and is usually 'disguised', and surrounded, as Nick has highlighted, by the moral obfuscation of privilege. This, with the social status of the sufferers, goes a long way to explain why this serious condition has received such little attention, or why it is denied or brushed aside by people like Charles (and myself for decades), despite their self-perspicacity. Indeed, I think we should be aware that with the 'softening' of boarding school regimes due to the abolition of fagging, banning of corporal punishment in 1998, and greater emphasis on child protection, we can expect the trauma incidence to shift increasingly towards the complex end of the spectrum in this social grouping, as Judith implies, probably the more serious end.

If the diagnostic classification of 'upper-class/boarding school trauma' had been available to Charles' analysts and the protocols of trauma therapy better understood then,<sup>9</sup> one can speculate that the outcome might have been more positive. But even some twenty years after the seminal work of Nick (and now others like Jungian analyst Joy Schaverien (2004, 2011) and psychotherapist Jane Barclay (2010)) on the nature of this subtle and tenacious trauma, there is little evidence that it is widely recognized. For example, the Department for Education has no policy guidelines as to what age a child may be sent to board.

It is my view that until this trauma syndrome is given due and proper recognition within the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic communities, including in training, many patients or clients from a 'privileged' background will fail to get the help they deserve.<sup>10</sup> That was my experience despite years on the couch.

As to Harold's proposition that had Charles been able to work on his justifiable anger and rage more directly and consciously and less by 'reparative identification' he would then have been able to turn the post-war world of psychoanalysis upside down, I have severe doubts. Not only did Charles have fundamental objections to the Freudian *Weltanschauung*, coherently set out in *Psychoanalysis and Beyond* (1985) and other writings, he made it clear in his late interview that he was opposed to the whole notion of a quasi-religious Movement separate from 'the existing disciplines of psychiatry, neurology, psychotherapy and psychology' (Holmes, 1996, p. 732). He had decisively broken with Freudianism in its many guises – he had indeed moved 'beyond' (a position I would now share). However, unusually for many psychotherapists, Charles recognized the client/patient as 'exist(ing) in society, a society of which they are both beneficiaries and victims, of which they are both protected members and casualties' (1995, p. 456). My feeling is that had Charles lived into the early 2000s, he would have warmed to the insights of Nick, Judith, Joy, and others, showing up social institutions and familial regimes which can inflict terrible mental damage on those – often children – who lack the power or knowledge to do anything other than to submit to them.

I think he might well have written a lucid and incisive article to this effect, calling on psychotherapists of all persuasions to take due note and stand up and protest – not 'bumble on'.

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### **Notes**

1. *Psychoanalysis and Beyond*, edited and with an introduction by Peter Fuller, contains a good selection of his writings and a comprehensive bibliography.
2. The Nursery, we should remember, was the often separate, seen-not-heard area for children in upper-class households. This model of 'being sent away' was established from very early on and inevitably internalized. I explored the issue of the 'withdrawn' nature of Charles' mother further in correspondence with her granddaughter, Catherine Merriman. It seems to have been partly caused by grief at the death of her brother in the First World War, but I also suggested, drawing on my

own experience of upper-class motherly withdrawal, that this was one way in which mothers 'protected' themselves and their sons (daughters were usually sent away later, but not always. My mother, whose parents were colonials in the British Raj was sent off at six; unsurprisingly, my sister was sent off to board at eight) from the dreadful pain of premature separation. Catherine agreed that my explanation for this 'double tragedy' made a good deal of sense. She had not sent her own children to boarding school.

3. An informative and often harrowing overview of British private prep schools is set out in social historian Vyvyan Brandon's *Prep School Children: A Class Apart Over Two Centuries*, London/New York: Continuum, 2009. My review is in *Attachment*, 4(2), 2010.
4. Annie Power in her commentary (Power, 2007) on my own boarding school trauma (Partridge, 2007) suggests that family tradition and the 'detachment' already inculcated at home can soften the blow for the established upper class. This was partly true in my case, but I feel buried the trauma even deeper in my unconscious.
5. The breaking of the news of their father's death to Alice and her sister was no less appalling, possibly more so. Despite living at home, they had not been allowed to see their father in the three weeks prior to his death. Fearing the worst they asked their governess if father was better. They were told, yes. In Alice's words, 'we raced along to the bedroom and burst into the room, and there was Mother sitting on the bed, and there was just one single bed instead of two. I remember feeling dreadful: I thought the top of my head was going to blow off. Then we went back to the Nursery and said that he was dead, and the governess shouted at us and was horrible to us.'
6. In his essay 'Reminiscences of a survivor: psychoanalysis 1937–1993' (1995), Charles reveals that it was only when he read Margaret Little's own account (1990) of her analysis with Sharpe that he fully realized that 'Sharpe had only been interested in the Oedipus complex and infantile sexuality, and that loss, bereavement, grief – subjects about which I then needed enlightenment – did not enter into her theoretical scheme of things'.
7. Nick's professional training was with the London Institute of Psychosynthesis. His route into working with boarding school survivors was via the Men's Movement of the mid-1980s, itself a response to the feminist revolution. Here he discovered the 'nameless shame' of those wounded by boarding school, himself included. His group workshops use a variety of methods, including meditation, ritual, gestalt, role-play, and cognitive techniques. I owe many of my insights into my own boarding school trauma from a workshop I attended in 2006.
8. *Chosen*, directed by Brian Wood, details the grooming, systematic sexual abuse, and horrific consequences suffered by three pupils at Caldicott boarding school in the 1960s and 1970s. It was first broadcast on More4 on 30 September 2008, and can be viewed free at [www.chosen.org.uk/](http://www.chosen.org.uk/), accessed 14 January 2011. My review is in *Attachment*, 3(1), 2009.
9. Trauma therapy is a burgeoning field, particularly in its early, more complex aspects (Gerhardt, 2004). Many of its methods have diverged from one-to-one 'talking cure', with body therapy an increasing part of the repertoire. Because so many

of the personal issues thrown up concern abuse of 'power' and 'powerlessness', as Judith Herman (2001) points out, groups can often be 'a source of validation and support', complementing dyadic therapy. The overall work of groups concerned with a particular traumatogenic issue can take on a political form, lobbying for redress and preventative action – a positive outlet for anger. A prime example is the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 2009 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement negotiated by survivors of residential schools for indigenous peoples – see their evolving website [www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3). Boarding Concern, [www.boardingconcern.org.uk](http://www.boardingconcern.org.uk), a self-help and campaigning group for boarding survivors in the UK, lobbies for the abolition of elective boarding for primary school children. There is further recent discussion of early boarding at the BBC Parents Blog – my contribution is under 'simonbss': [www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/parents/2010/09/boarding-school-at-eight-years.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/parents/2010/09/boarding-school-at-eight-years.shtml), accessed 12 November 2010.

10. There has been no survey-based research on the numbers of boarders/ex-boarders who present for psychotherapy (though moves are afoot to correct this), but anecdotal evidence suggests it is quite substantial in the private sector. Such a view is confirmed in Joy Schaverien's paper 'Boarding school syndrome: broken attachments a hidden trauma' (2011).

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