

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE MYERS COLLECTION

by

SARAH BAKEWELL *

The National Institute of Industrial Psychology was founded in 1921 by two men from very different worlds. Charles Myers taught at Cambridge and was an expert in the by then fairly respectable discipline of psychology. Henry J. Welch was a businessman, particularly interested in the placement of young people in industry. Between them they established the thoroughly modern science of industrial psychology.

To a large extent the Institute also evolved in close collaboration with a distinctive creature of the First World War, the Industrial Fatigue Research Board. Set up in 1918 with the aim of improving productivity, it was a reflection of the unprecedented industrial needs of the "war to end all wars" and of the new spirit of the postwar years. It investigated the causes of accidents, illness, and fatigue-related mistakes, and proposed changes of layout and procedure to minimize them. It was the N.I.I.P.'s innovation, however, to locate much of the problem of lost productivity not only in long hours and poor safety procedures, but also in the behaviour of the human mind, now seen as a suitable subject for brisk, pragmatic investigation.

From the beginning the Institute stressed the scientific nature of its researches and the relevance of its work to industrialists, while itself maintaining a strictly non-profit status. Academic psychologists and physiologists were drafted onto the Scientific Committee, and companies such as Rowntree's, Cadbury's and Debenhams were involved as well. The Institute spanned the two worlds very effectively. Its "Plan of Action" was set out under six headings which reflected its wide range of concern: theoretical research, practical industrial application, and schemes for the improvement of workers' physical and mental well-being. They were as follows:

1) To find the "best methods of applying human energy" to industry, shops and offices, using physical ergonomic techniques such as improving lighting and layout, and mental ones such as providing rest periods and minimizing boredom. Much of the early work focused on the stress caused by poor arrangement of materials and processes.

* Sarah J. Bakewell, BA, MSc, Library Assistant, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE.

All quoted passages are from Henry J. Welch and Charles S. Myers, *Ten years of industrial psychology*, London, Isaac Pitman, 1932.

2) To devise physical and psychological tests for young people which would ensure that they entered occupations suited to them.

3) Generally to improve workers' health and happiness and to foster good labour relations.

4) To study factors in the sale and promotion of products, such as advertising and design.

5) To provide lectures and training courses for both employers and workers.

6) To support general research into industrial psychology and physiology.¹

Sir Charles Sherrington, at a public meeting arranged by the Institute in 1922, put it less modestly: "This Institute is, incidentally, nay, more than incidentally, very directly concerned in largely increasing the commodity of 'happiness'."² And indeed, the employers were usually happy, although sometimes they needed some help to correct "mistaken attitudes",³ and the workers were often happy: "'We are in clover now' . . . 'I wish you had been here when I was a girl; I wouldn't look the old hag I do now.'"⁴

One of the Institute's principal concerns which did appear to increase happiness was vocational selection and guidance, the matching of young people to suitable careers through tests of various sorts. One of the first experiments was conducted in 1922 in collaboration with the Industrial Fatigue Research Board. Tests of intelligence, special abilities and personality were given to one hundred London school children. Two years after they began their working lives, a follow-up study revealed that over 80 per cent of those who had followed the Institute's recommendations were satisfied with their jobs while over 60 per cent of those who had not were dissatisfied.⁵

Not everyone was entirely happy. The N.I.I.P. came under attack for being insufficiently cautious and too prone to making sweeping claims for its new approach. From a different perspective, some labour organizations felt that far from improving worker well-being, industrial psychology redefined genuine grievances or the class struggle as a medical problem which could be "cured". The Institute took care to be extremely diplomatic in its dealings with labour and even the choice of its name was calculated not to alarm or offend.⁶ Despite these doubts, the N.I.I.P. continued to be greatly in demand and increasingly influential.

Having started with a staff of two, by 1930 the Institute employed about fifty people, including over thirty researchers and investigators. Its main income was derived from research commissioned by industry and from producing and selling psychological tests, which became very popular. It also conducted its own research, published three journals and provided various training programmes. It offered a public information service as well as producing private and confidential reports for individual clients, and it built up a comprehensive library of reference material. A librarian was appointed to look after this collection in 1926.

¹ p. 9.

² p. 121.

³ p. 63.

⁴ p. 60.

⁵ p. 31.

⁶ p. 3.

Plate 1: C. S. Myers



By permission of the British Library of Political and Economic Science



Plate 2: H. J. Welch

By permission of the British Library of Political and Economic Science



Plate 3: A float in the Lord Mayor's show of 1931 promoting vocational guidance for youth

By permission of the British Library of Political and Economic Science

The Myers Collection

Most of the texts in the library concerned industrial and applied psychology, health and safety, education and management. A rather different range of material was contributed by the psychologist Charles Spearman (1863–1945). He was a professor at University College London who had spent several years training in Germany. He had maintained his connections with European academic life and had amassed a fascinating collection of nineteenth-century, and some eighteenth-century, European psychology and philosophy, as well as many British and American texts and a collection of nearly 2000 offprints. Much of this material is filled with his annotations, and many of the modern works were presented to him by the authors. When the N.I.I.P. acquired the collection on his death in 1945, they disposed of some material which was irrelevant to them (studies of psychic research, for example) and designated the rest the Spearman Collection. The following year, Myers himself died and the Council of the N.I.I.P. named the library the Charles Myers Library in his honour.

By the 1960s the Institute was facing a number of problems, in particular from its own success. Its founders had written in 1932: “We may envisage a future when every large factory, store and office, and every university, will have an industrial psychologist immediately or indirectly attached to it.”⁷ Unfortunately for the N.I.I.P., this came true to a large extent and, having promoted awareness of the need for industrial psychology, it now faced stiff competition from private firms, and many large companies had their own resident psychologists. Moreover, most of the specific techniques developed by the Institute could not be copyrighted, and they were taken over by others to highly profitable effect.

In 1964 the Government required the Institute to step up its research for industry, to a point which overstrained its resources. At first a government grant was provided but this ceased in 1969. By the 1970s the N.I.I.P. was in deep financial trouble. Eventually, at the end of August 1973, it was forced to suspend its operations, while maintaining its existence in a dormant state.

The North East London Polytechnic (now the University of East London) proposed an arrangement whereby the Institute would be given office space and its library housed at the Polytechnic; in return the Institute’s staff would help the Polytechnic’s staff to carry on research and offer courses similar to those which had been given by the N.I.I.P. It was understood to be a temporary arrangement until the Institute was in a position to resume its own operation. However, this never happened, in spite of desperate attempts to raise money and fervent letters to *The Times*. In 1977, it was decided to wind up the Institute’s operations permanently.

The National Foundation for Educational Research took over publication of the N.I.I.P.’s psychological tests and some other material. Some archival matter was transferred to the Royal Society and the London School of Economics, and many reports done for private companies were shredded for reasons of confidentiality, but the Charles Myers Library itself was formally acquired by the Polytechnic, which, it was hoped, would use it as the basis for developing a resource on the history of psychology to accompany a new course planned on the subject. However, in practice

⁷ p. 139.

the collection was used very little, at least in part because it was relatively inaccessible and few people knew of it. Many items were sorely in need of conservation, and some material was uncatalogued. One academic, Graham Richards, took a special interest in the collection and made heroic efforts to publicize, maintain and catalogue it and, in particular, to procure money for the conservation of the more fragile volumes. He produced a handwritten catalogue of Spearman's offprints and wrote numerous reports and letters about the collection.

However, the funds required could not be raised and the library remained in a state of obscurity. Eventually the idea was mooted that the collection would be better off in a more suitable and spacious location. Talk of selling the collection came to the attention of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in 1989, and an offer was made to the Polytechnic. Those concerned with the collection supported this, feeling that the WIHM had better resources for conservation and storage of the collection, and would provide greater access to an established community of scholars. However, the very process of putting it up for sale regenerated interest in it at the Polytechnic, and a decision was made not to sell it after all.

This burst of interest did not last and the collection slumbered on. A major problem then arose in early 1991 when Livingstone House, which housed the majority of the Myers Library, had to be closed. As a result the library began a nomadic life which jeopardized its security, and staff at the Polytechnic came to feel that there really was no room for it. The idea of disposal surfaced once more, and in October 1991 it was again offered to the WIHM and the purchase was completed. It is now in the process of being catalogued and incorporated into the WIHM's Modern Medicine collection, although it remains accessible as a separate collection.

The Myers Collection is a rich and varied resource, which probably contains as yet undiscovered treasures. It consists of over ten thousand items, including about four thousand monographs, a couple of thousand bound volumes of journals, a thousand or so yearbooks and annual reports, and innumerable pamphlets. The monographs have been catalogued, but the exact numbers of the remaining serials and pamphlets are as yet unknown. The monograph collection includes the original N.I.I.P. library of psychology, health and management, the Spearman Collection of psychology and philosophy (notable for a number of very interesting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works), various government reports and conference proceedings, some theses and some 1970s texts donated after the N.I.I.P.'s closure.

It is significant and rather poignant that the collection has developed from being a dynamic resource in constant use to a memento of its times, housed in a historical library and of interest primarily to historians. The National Institute of Industrial Psychology was a product of the modernist era, an energetic organization devoted simultaneously to industrial efficiency and to a rather grand goal of human and social improvement. In 1929 Henry Welch could say: "We all look forward to a time when working people of all types in this country will be engaged in the work for which their temperaments and abilities most fit them, and when they will be able to return to their homes after their day's work is done, not too fatigued or disgruntled to interest themselves according to their inclinations and capacities, in literature, art, music and

The Myers Collection

the higher things of life.”⁸ His dream, sadly, has fallen somewhat short of reality. However, in other ways, the Institute was really a victim of its success. It promoted awareness of its subject to the point where its own existence became redundant, and it is not easy nowadays to remember that industrial psychology was once a radical and thoroughly modern idea, in part the logical outcome of the industrial revolution, and in part truly a vision of a better world.

⁸ p. 129.