Thomas Kirkbride and “Asylum Medicine”

Nancy Tomes

In 1841 Pennsylvania Hospital opened a second facility called the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane. One of the leading physicians in the history of the treatment of the mentally ill in the United States, Thomas Story Kirkbride (1809–1883) served as chief physician of the new facility from 1841 until his death forty-three years later. Kirkbride, a Quaker, believed in the “moral treatment” of the mentally ill. This meant treating the ill with compassion and respect in a physical setting that was constructed to calm and refresh them. In keeping with this philosophy, Kirkbride designed an attractive, rambling building for his hospital that was set amidst pleasant grounds and isolated from the energy of the city. As described by author Nancy Tomes in the following selection from her book on Kirkbride, the goal of the physician in chief of the asylum was twofold: to provide a comfortable, homelike surrounding for patients and to control and manage them in a secure setting. Over time, the so-called Kirkbride plan for mental asylums became the model for state asylums built in such cities as Trenton, New Jersey; Worcester, Massachusetts; and Buffalo, New York. By the early 1900s, however, the concept of building as cure was discarded and the large, Victorian-style buildings set on acres of open land were regarded as too expensive to maintain. Many fell into disuse and were eventually closed down while others were renovated for other uses.

Upon arriving at the Pennsylvania Hospital [for the Insane] after a long carriage ride from the city, the families of prospective patients beheld an institution quite unlike the
horrible madhouse they had feared. Its secluded rural location promised the protection from public notoriety they desired, and the pleasant, even luxurious appearance of the building and grounds belied grim preconceptions of institutional life. Wherever the patrons looked, from the ten-pin bowling alley to the reading room, they saw evidence of the efforts made to watch over and amuse the patients, efforts far more extensive and well organized than their own home regimen. Meeting the asylum superintendent, who spoke to them with a blend of paternal concern and scientific authority, the family found themselves further comforted. From first to last, every aspect of the asylum’s appearance and organization seemed designed expressly to relieve and reassure them. The institution and, more importantly, the physician at its head held out to the family the promise of a benign control, a persuasive influence, that would rid insanity of its horrors.

The impressions created by the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane were hardly effortless or unpremeditated. The reassuring details of its regimen and appearance reflected Thomas Story Kirkbride’s painstaking labor. From his earliest years as superintendent, he made the creation and maintenance of the asylum’s therapeutic image his central professional concern. Personal factors, including his father’s pursuit of agricultural improvements and his own practical bent, so early manifested in the love of surgery, contributed to Kirkbride’s interest in asylum construction. His devotion to the [Society of] Friends’ principles no doubt made him particularly sensitive to the sufferings caused by insanity and desirous of relieving them. All these predilections found expression in Kirkbride’s philosophy of asylum medicine, which made hospital design and administration central to its practice. This philosophy, first enunciated in an 1847 article in the American Journal of Medical Science and then amplified in his 1854 book, On the Construction, Management, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane, not only guided Kirkbride’s own practice at the