



November 1884 Freda Mew (aged 5 and half). Charlotte Mew (aged 15). Caroline Frances Anne Mew (Anne) (aged eleven). They are the grandchildren of the architect of three English lunatic asylums. This is the story of Freda and Charlotte's own mental distress, told by Andrew Roberts of the Survivors History Group, using Charlotte's poems and Freda's medical case notes from the Isle of Wight Records Office.

The story of Freda and Charlotte Mew

A family in turmoil

In September 1898, the Mews' father, a London architect, died after a long and painful illness. After he died Charlotte and the middle sister, Anne, remained in London with their mother.

They had a 20-year-old brother, Henry, who had been confined to an asylum before the death of their father. Their youngest sister, Freda, aged 19, was living on her aunt and uncle's farm on the Isle of Wight. Two months after her father's death Freda became 'insane' and was sent to a nursing home. In January of the following year she was certified and admitted to the private wing of the Isle of Wight County Asylum.

Mrs. Mew was looked after by Anne and Charlotte until she died 1923, after which the older sisters continued to live together as companions. They had resolved many years ago that they would not marry, for fear of passing on the taint in their blood-line.

Henry died in a Peckham asylum in 1901 from tuberculosis, a common asylum disease.

In 1927, Anne, like her father, died of cancer. Distraught, and deluded that cancer germs were attacking her from the air, Charlotte swallowed disinfectant in a mental nursing home in 1928. She was buried with Anne. Freda, the last remaining family member continued to live at the Isle of Wight asylum until she died in 1958.

This history has taken historians many decades to extract, the Mew family kept it very secret and Charlotte would not provide any biographical details to her publishers.

Freda Mew's medical case notes survive for the eleven years from 1898 to 1909, a period when Charlotte and Anne were still alive. Surprisingly, they do not mention the event of her father's death. The "supposed cause" of her insanity was "probably hereditary", there being a family history of insanity in her brother [Henry].

Freda Mew from her case notes

From Freda's first weeks on the ward, in February 1899, she sat "without apparently reading" the book or newspaper she held. The doctor concluded from what she did say that she had "delusions of persecution".

Freda's intense withdrawal deepened. By March 1899, she did not speak at all, and she continued silently withdrawn for eleven years. Sometimes, however, she would suddenly act, jumping out of bed and rushing for the windows or seizing articles of nurses' clothing saying they were hers.

At the end of the fourth month, Freda's case notes became quarterly. This means Freda was now regarded as a chronic case. In 1902 she was noted as "perfectly stuporous". She had "dirty habits", wetting and soiling herself. A young woman in her early twenties, she was described as "utterly demented".

From 1907, Freda spent all day in bed. She resisted any kind of examination, but her body appeared to be wasting away. No organic disease could be found, but it was difficult to tell because Freda kicked and bit anyone who came near.

But in 1909 another Freda emerged. For years she had notes like this one in May: "Lies in bed and never speaks - is spiteful and bites." In August, although still "spiteful and silent", she has changed position and "sits in [the] airing court with a fixed stare". Two months later and it is noted that she "has a funny way of getting up suddenly and dancing across room or airing court - has been up daily and is all the better for it." And on that hopeful note, the case notes end.

It is, of course, complete coincidence that, at about this time, life began to look up for Charlotte and Anne as well. A few days before the last case note was written, Charlotte had a poem published with the verse:

*Yet you would wake and want, you said,
The little whirr of wings, the clear
Gay notes, the wind...*

Asylum people in Charlotte's poetry

One of Charlotte's poems On the Asylum Road encounters patients outside the asylum and describes them as "incarnate wages of man's sin" - a reference to the recent discovery that syphilis was the cause of 'General Paralysis of the Insane', a disease that destroyed many in early 20th century asylums.

The most controversial of her asylum poems follows "Ken" on his life's journey to the asylum, suggesting that the asylum destroyed him. It was a poem that her editors refused to publish.

Both poems put mad people in another world to that the sane - one of different perceptions - the mad world being one in which Charlotte wrote some of her poetry. After her brother Henry's death, she wrote a verse she described as "a lapse from ... sanity and self-control" when "the mind and senses can stand no more". When Charlotte speaks of asylum people, the "saddest crowd that you will ever pass", she is listening to voices within and without.

Charlotte describes a mutual lack of perception. "The mad cannot see into the sane, or the sane inhabit the world of the mad. We crack jokes together, testifying to our common humanity, but we are divided from one another by dark glass."

Sometimes Ken, like perhaps Freda, has "evil fits" and people cannot "move him from his chair" - He sits there, "biting his rosary to bits" and, the poem accuses, "you did not look at him". The dark glass of our perception is because the sane do not look at, or try to understand what insane behaviour means.

Ken's behaviour is intense with meaning. She writes that people should have noticed that he was "pointing to the Christ" [on a crucifix] and trying to say "take it away". For Ken, Charlotte explains, nothing was dead. If he picked up a broken wing, he called it "a bird". He has a horror of death images matched by his affirmation of life.

Like Freda, "he scarcely spoke". He walked weirdly "groping, with knarred,

high-lifted feet and arms thrust out as if to beat always against a threat of bars." Adults regretted being near him, but as he walked along the street, a child would often trot beside him. Every day he went to see the deer, and when he went to church it was to see the lights. Through "his dim long twilight", Charlotte writes, "this, at least, shone clear", the children and the deer "belonged to him".

They took Ken to the asylum and the poem wonders, in "that red brick barn upon the hill - can one own the deer, and does one walk with children still as one did here - and if some night when you have not seen any light they cannot move you from your chair, what happens there?"

The sensitivity to meaning that Charlotte describes in Ken is something she often writes about in herself. It is a sensitivity I experienced in my companions when I first became a patient in a mental hospital. We should not romanticise something that can lead people to kill themselves, but neither should we refuse to listen to it. Reading Freda's notes, I wonder if someone came along who listened to her, and maybe that was a part of her rebirth in the airing court. There is a note of sympathy in her last case note that is absent from all that precedes.

A fuller version of this article at <http://studymore.org.uk/fredamew.htm> provides references.

If you have experienced mental health issues at any point in your life, and would like to join the Survivor History Group, you can contact Andrew at: studymore@studymore.org.uk