

Portrait of Dr. C.K. Clarke (The Old Physician Behind the Building)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

On my way to a spoken word event in Kensington Market, I walked by the College St. site (formerly known as the Clarke Institute) and wondered how long the structure built in the 1960s would remain standing at the North end of Chinatown. Once a patient at the College and Spadina location, I remembered looking out a small rectangular window onto College St. and wondering what was wrong with my suddenly unquiet mind. Famous (or infamous) Toronto psychiatrist Dr. Charles Kirk Clarke (1857-1924), who later had the mental health facility named after him, wasn't known to me at the time. It wasn't until a relapse five years later on a different site that I would learn more about the eugenics of psychosis and what made mental health facilities (like 'The Clarke') so scary to patients locked in during the night. A proponent of the Canadian mental hygiene movement, C.K. Clarke found Emil Kraepelin's clinic in Munich an exemplary model to replicate in Canada and was instrumental in changing Canadian "asylums" into "Hospitals for the Insane" (1). After finding an old biography of the Canadian psychiatrist at the Toronto Reference Library (2), I was amazed that this historical figure, who was photographed in Berlin at the turn of the century within the source, has come to be known not based on his polished suits and characteristic mustache, but by his embodiment of one of Toronto's most mysterious (and even sinister) landmarks. The College St. site, which still holds confidential records of my diagnosis and mental health history, will continue to operate as a 24-hour emergency facility in the immediate future (3), despite a scare that it would be turned into condo space with a severe rent increase (4). To demolish 'The Clarke' and to erase its dark institutional history (5), would be saying that what I suffered in high school and university never happened and that those years should be forgotten like the deleted memories of shock victims after multiple rounds of ECT for their severe depression. When mental hygiene became less fashionable, and words like "mental health" replaced it, how does Dr. Charles Kirk Clarke fit in to the history of psychiatry in our city? It is well-documented that "[w]hen Dr. Daniel Clark retired as Superintendent of the Toronto Asylum, a position he had held for thirty years, C.K. Clarke was offered the post [and] [...] took up his appointment in Toronto in September 1905." (2) However, among the psychiatric patient community, he is occasionally associated with an institution's "back wards", or "out-of-sight hellholes" where the "worst abuses happened" (5). Others outside the community may prefer to characterize him as a misunderstood and once celebrated mental health pioneer and "expert witness" who deserves recognition, having "attended more than sixty murder trials where the plea of insanity was raised as a defence" (2). The truth is, when the Clarke Institute still stands as a looming tower of mind science in the Toronto night, the debate can continue over whether this doctor's views on immigration reveal his racial bias (5) or his professional insight on how to select new ('non-defective') Canadian citizens from abroad. If Dr. Clarke represents all that is vile about psychiatry in Canada, what does this say about the institutions that once backed the doctor and now want to distance themselves from him? It would be unfair to say that the University of Toronto is a backward institution if they once had him as their Dean of Medicine. Also, maybe it's better to say that the Canadian Mental

Health Association, which was once called the “National Committee for Mental Hygiene” when Clarke co-founded it (6), has moved out of the dark storm clouds of eugenics and into the clearer skies of the mental health era. As student condo space reaches skyward across the street from the Clarke and as the familiar squalor of Chinatown starts to be replaced by modern and slick new development, the tall facility is gradually losing its visibility from the south, making me still wonder how long before all of the mental health hardships, crises and back ward history associated with the site suddenly vanishes completely from our city’s guilty conscience.

References:

1) “The Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto-Reflections on Social and Architectural History”, Edna Hudson, Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy, Toronto, 2000. P. 174.

2) “Charles Kirk Clarke: a pioneer of Canadian Psychiatry”, Cyril Greenland, 1966. p.14, p.13, p.12.

3) CBC News

Link: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/camh-says-crippling-rent-increase-puts-college-street-location-in-jeopardy-1.3140424>

4) Toronto Star

Link: <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/07/07/sudden-rent-hike-puts-camh-college-st-facility-in-jeopardy.html>

5) “Disability Incarcerated: imprisonment and disability”, Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman and Allison C. Carey, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014, p.121, p.46, p.64.

6) The Canadian Encyclopedia (Search: “Charles Kirk Clarke”)

Link: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/charles-kirk-clarke/>