Conclusion
Asylum Periodicals for the Past, Present, and Future

On the evening of Saturday, 20 September 1845, twenty-five-year-old Peter Ronaldson ran away from the Royal Edinburgh Asylum. An attendant followed his tracks all the way to Dumfries, where the fugitive allegedly approached a bookseller with a poem dedicated to the Highland and Agricultural Society's Cattle Show that took place there. The bookseller liked it, printed it, and sold the copies for a penny to the farmers who attended the fare.[1] With the earnings, Ronaldson travelled to England, where he was eventually captured and returned to Edinburgh, before his father ordered his transfer to the Glasgow Royal Asylum. A student of divinity, Ronaldson was known to the readers of the *Morningside Mirror* as the main contributor to the first issue, published on 15 September 1845. Two out of the three pieces in it were authored by him: 'Reflections on Love of Country' and 'Sunset', a poem which was later reprinted and commended by several contemporary periodicals and newspapers.[2] His medical notes from the Glasgow Royal Asylum suggest that Ronaldson continued to produce writing for publication. In 1846, the house surgeon remarked that the patient had 'latterly been writing poetry with the view of having it printed at the Press of the Institution'.[3] At that time, the printing machine at the Gartnavel was still in operation, though not for publishing a periodical. It is possible that Ronaldson's poems were printed, but it is difficult to guess what use he had of them in that institution. His notes show that he repeatedly objected to his confinement, accused his relatives (especially his father) of conspiring against him and mistreating him, and felt 'that his poetry is of the highest kind' and 'that his talents are unknown to those who are capable of appreciating them'.[4] He left the Gartnavel 'relieved' on 12 April 1847, disappearing from the record.[5]

This glimpse into Ronaldson's life encapsulates the complexity of patients' experience in the nineteenth-century asylum. While unhappy with his confinement in the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, his story suggests that it was there that he first found support and encouragement of his

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literary aspirations. His medical notes state that as soon as his health allowed, he was 'induced to contribute to the periodical which [had] been commenced by the patients of the asylum, and his contributions [were] on the whole of a very creditable description'.[6] The dominant place his writing occupied in the first issue of the *Morningside Mirror* and his success in using his literary labour to fund his escape to England offered further reassurance of his ability. In the Gartnavel, however, he found himself in a dreadful situation. He was once again in captivity, but this time without an outlet for his creativity or validation of his talent. It is difficult to imagine the disappointment, anger, and frustration he suffered, as he was repeatedly described by the house surgeon as stupid or imbecilic.[7]

The role of the *Morningside Mirror* in Ronaldson's life is hard to pin down without his own narrative of the events outlined above. His escape from Morningside about five days after the publication date of the first issue is a reminder that the collaboration that the production of asylum periodicals involved could take place in the context of intense conflict. Nevertheless, while unable to alleviate all the discomfort and frustration of institutionalisation, at the very least asylum periodicals offered patients opportunities to explore and nurture their own creativity and cultivate a sense of self-worth. The institutional support of patients' writing evident from the case notes could have a significant positive effect on patients' confidence in their abilities and agency.

Asylum periodicals thus invited and enabled patients to function as active literary producers and participants in contemporary culture. For some, such as Ronaldson, they could have been the first chance to showcase their literary work, but a significant number of the contributors, editors, and printers of these publications were already involved in the print trade. Asylum periodicals should consequently be seen as extensions of the diverse and ever-expanding network of print throughout the nineteenth century. Patients who produced the periodicals were well-acquainted with literary conventions, and sometimes they themselves were well-known in the literary spheres. In addition, asylum periodicals joined a stream of other publications circulating in institutional libraries and sustained the provision of reading matter in asylums. These exchanges and the interactions they facilitated enabled patients to communicate with each other and with society at large. The dialogue promoted the formation of a cross-institutional, transatlantic imagined community whose members took pride in their writing and felt empowered to express themselves creatively. It enabled them to speak up about the injustices they have suffered and voice their criticism of society, while simultaneously trying to

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find their way back in by reminding their sane readers of the insanity that they all shared.

This book has demonstrated the value of asylum periodicals for both historians and literary scholars in their explorations of the nineteenth-century periodical press, literary representations of marginalised groups, patients' experiences, and institutional reality. Illustrating the role of nineteenth-century periodicals in community building and identity formation, they demonstrate the power of print to bring people together in the project of representing themselves and reworking existing representations through their engagement with literature and culture. They also pose questions about the freedom that the press promised, showing the negotiation, tension, and collaboration at the heart of every publishing project, as well as the ways in which power manifested itself through print and was construed by it. Furthermore, despite their ambiguity, these publications contain unique insight into nineteenth-century mental healthcare and the experience of mental health and illness. They defy simplistic understandings of the asylum as a space of confinement, healing, or retreat and direct the focus away from the doctor–patient relationship and towards the numerous interactions and factors that shaped their making and patients' daily experience in the asylum. Their history illuminates a much larger network of people, all of whom navigated not only medical and cultural discourses on madness but also literary and publishing conventions and socio-economic realities, acted in different capacities at different times, and were therefore endowed with various amounts of power. Far from polished institutional accounts, these publications embody the heteroglossia of asylum communities and therefore represent the often-contradictory plurality that defines the historiography of psychiatry.

There is plenty of room for future research into these and other similar titles. While I have added a few publications to the list of periodicals that have been discussed in depth, there are more that remain to be studied, which have been listed in the Timeline of titles at the start of the book. Tracing the inception of the genre and seeking to establish its main characteristics, I have focused predominantly on publications from Scotland and the United States from the middle of the century, while suggesting how the practice spread beyond these countries. There is much room for further exploration and comparison, as asylum periodicals emerged across the globe from the 1860s onwards. In one of its reviews of the *Morningside Mirror* from 1845, the *Athenaeum* states that: 'in France and America, as well as Scotland, not only had printing been introduced into lunatic asylums, but newspapers were printed there for and by

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patients'.[8] While the French example(s) that the *Athenaeum* refers to have not been identified, French institutions did house patients' manuscript and printed periodicals later in the century.[9] Óscar Martínez Azumendi and Fabio Ares have recorded the existence of two Spanish-language asylum periodicals during the long nineteenth century: *La Razón de la sin Razón* (1865–1866; 1879–1881), published in San Baudilio de Llobregat Hospital near Barcelona and *Ecos de las Mercedes* (1903–1905), the magazine of Hospicio de las Mercedes, Buenos Aires (currently known as Hospital José T. Borda).[10] Two titles are known to have existed in Italy in the early 1870s, one of which was launched by the well-known Italian alienist Cesare Lombroso in the San Benedetto Hospital.[11] Turner has also mentioned the *Fort England Mirror* of Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, South Africa, and the *Lancaster Argus* of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum at St John in New Brunswick, Canada (also published in the 1890s).[12] The *Asylum Journal* (1881–1885) of the Public Lunatic Asylum for British Guiana is another example of asylum publishing, but it is perhaps more closely related to the *American Journal of Insanity*: though printed by patients, it exclusively showcased the superintendent's work.[13]

There is evidence that by the 1880s, printing presses were introduced in Swedish asylums too, though again, not for the publication of patients' writing:

> A curious book has just been published in Sweden. It is written by a man doctor, and he has been set up, printed, and bound by his patients. This is how it happened: amongst the inmates of the Konradsberg Lunatic Asylum at Stockholm there happened to be a compositor and a supply of type in a small hand press were provided to give him occupation and amusement. One by one several other inmates became interested in the matter, and were instructed by their fellow-patient in the art of type-setting .... The thing now was to find 'copy', and here again Dr Bjornstrom was not at fault. He had written a book on 'Diseases of the Mind and Abnormal Psychical Conditions, regarded from the Forensic Standpoint'. He at once entrusted the manuscript to his patients, with the result that they have turned out a book of 202 pages, the type, binding, and general appearance of which are such that no one would ever suspect that they were entirely the work of the class of unfortunates to whose sufferings its pages are devoted.[14]

The detailed outline of the organisation of labour in the production of Dr Bjornstrom's book reveals some similarities between the operation of the Swedish asylum printing office and those in British and American institutions. Once again, it suggests that publishing projects were usually inspired by the presence of an experienced printer in the asylum and at

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least seemingly motivated by the provision of recreation and/or occupation to him. The fact that the printer-patient trained others to compose type raises questions about the longevity of this publishing undertaking. If, as I have shown, asylum presses usually fell into disuse once the printer-patients that operated them left the institution or became incapable of continuing their duties, it would be interesting to see whether this Swedish press lasted longer and produced other publications. The spread of asylum publishing and the different purposes, production set-ups, and manifestations of the practice therefore remain to be studied.

It would be of interest to trace how the genre changed over time too. If the popular adoption of the moral treatment in mental institution was a key factor in the establishment of early asylum periodicals, how did the loss of faith in the system towards the end of the nineteenth century affect asylum publishing and the purposes of periodicals? Clearly, mental institutions continued to be interested in facilitating such projects, as indicated by the cluster of publications known to have been launched after 1860 (see the Timeline of titles in this book). The *Morningside Mirror* survived until 1974, so a study of its history of nearly 130 years could offer new insights into the development of British and Scottish psychiatric practices, the (self)representation of people dealing with mental illness, and the social and institutional role of the publication. More comparative studies between different nineteenth- and twentieth-century titles could also further or test some of the arguments presented in this book. For instance, my impressions from consulting existing studies and asylum periodicals from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggest that asylums tended to outsource the printing of their publications in this period.[15] Perhaps, as printing technology advanced, they found the work unsuitable for patients or the machinery too inaccessible and difficult to handle for the production of good quality newspapers and magazines.

From the 1960s onwards, several of the asylums discussed here launched typewritten newspapers and magazines. The Gartnavel had several publications produced by patients and staff between 1966 and 1979.[16] *Wadjamadouraydays* was issued in the 1990s in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital (formerly 'Asylum') as a result of the appointment of a writer in residence at the institution.[17] The Murray Royal produced two publications in the 1990s (The *Clarion* and *Titanic Verses*) and renewed *Excelsior* between 1981 and 1983. The summer issue of 1981 contains a rather flawed historical account of asylum periodicals by the physician superintendent, which attempts to promote a sense of persistence through time, urging: 'We have a tradition to continue.'[18] Comparisons between

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these more recent productions and their nineteenth-century counterparts can examine this sentiment of existing continuity throughout history, identifying areas of permanence and mutability in mental healthcare and art and occupational therapy.

Beyond the therapeutic uses of such periodicals, asylum periodicals have an important role in the history of mental health advocacy. They were among the first opportunities for patients to unite and speak for themselves as a group, with or without the involvement of physicians. Their legacy can be traced to present-day forums and publications such as *Asylum* magazine, which has carried this tradition beyond institutional contexts. Launched in 1986, it invites 'contributions from service users, ex-users or survivors; activists, family members and frontline psychiatric or mental health nurses' in the pursuit of a democratic model of mental healthcare that defies the inequalities between medical professionals and people who identify as mad or mentally ill.

Direct connections between present-day mental healthcare and nineteenth-century asylum periodicals have already been made and employed in various projects. The *Morningside Mirror* was revived in 2010 to celebrate the Bicentenary of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. While highlighting the history of the institution and the provisions for art and occupational therapy, this Artlink-driven new series of the magazine allowed more openly critical voices in its pages than its predecessor. In one of the articles, Albert Nicholson, a member of the Patients' Council, reflects that: 'Care is really about treating people with kindness, understanding and developing an awareness of where they're coming from. I don't see much of it.'[19] Another project that has drawn inspiration from nineteenth-century asylum publications was run by Lauren Tenney. Interested in the reactions of people with lived experience of psychiatric systems to the *Opal*, she has made a case that the publication has great potential to stimulate activism and inform modern-day debates on human rights in psychiatry. She describes her own experience of reading the magazine as follows:

> This time that I spent with The Opal (1851–1860) was precious to me. I laughed. I cried. I became enraged and then inspired. I had a-ha moment after a-ha moment as I made deep, internal connections to what I was reading. In reading through The Opal, I pulled 138 separate instances of connections I made with common language or themes of the Mental Patients Liberation Movement today.[20]

Observing similar reactions among the participants in her study, Tenney concludes that:

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> The Opal (1851–1860) exists and tells of a people who are very much like the people who today are locked away in institutions and in the community struggling for their liberation and basic human rights. . . . The writings of the institutionalized, deinstitutionalized and reinstitutionalized in the modern day movement talk of tortures in the form of treatments, applications, and control mechanisms the same as the alienated did a century and a half ago and we believe this is significant.[21]

Whether directly or indirectly inspired by nineteenth-century asylum periodicals, these projects and publications suggest that some of the issues that patients faced and discussed (or merely hinted at) on their pages are far from resolved. Future researchers, be they historians, literary scholars, or Mad activists, will have opportunities to bring their findings to present-day discussions of madness and mental healthcare.

Having had a look at the present and the future, in the concluding lines I return to the nineteenth century and the people whose stories I have pieced together and lived through during my research. Since this book is largely about their voices and the complicated ways of their expression, I want to end it with the ending of Peter Ronaldson's poem, which, somewhat ironically, hints at his upcoming escape:

> Far away the sun is wheeling
> To begin another day,
> And I gaze with sadd'ning feeling
> On the latest lingering ray.
>
> Gone – the azure vault is darkling,
> Night enshrouds yon mountain dome,
> Bright a silvery star is sparkling;
> I must hie me to my home.[22]

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