

Report of 21 April 2016 Meeting

Royal Society

Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Professor Gordon Parker, AO, MB BS (Syd), MD (UNSW), PhD, DSc, FRANZCP, FASSA

Topic: The World of Polar Disorders and Churchill's Gallipoli

Professor Gordon Parker delivered his lecture to an 80 person audience just three days before Anzac Day. It is not surprising then that he was able to draw a wonderful audience with this topic. He also attracts huge interest as the leading voice on bipolar conditions and research into them, and many attendees were eager to hear him speak as a follow-up to the fascinating lectures he has delivered to the Southern Highlands Branch of the Royal Society on previous occasions.

It is astonishing to relate that of the more than 650 biographies which Winston Churchill has inspired, only three previous writers have previously made a case for Churchill suffering from polar disorder. Gordon Parker spent the first section of his lecture detailing some bipolar disorder nuances, then asked the audience to form an opinion, from the evidence he was about to present, whether Churchill suffered from a bipolar disorder or not, and if so, whether it had contributed to the fatal Dardanelles/Gallipoli campaign.

Bipolar disorder is characterized by confronting mood swings, where the patient can be on a manic high at one stage, and in the depths of depression at the next. Lloyd George described Churchill's reaction as Big Ben struck 11 and war was announced. A radiant Churchill, words pouring out after each other, raced into the room where George and his wife were quietly sitting. He was wildly giving instructions for where telegrams were to be immediately sent. Lloyd George stated later that he did not know what was the more disquieting of the two events – war being declared or Churchill's manic behaviour. Lloyd George was later to liken Churchill to a chauffeur who is apparently sane and drives with great skill for months and then suddenly takes people over a precipice.

Newspaper proprietor Lord Beaverbrook described Churchill as either “at the top of the wheel of confidence or at the bottom of an intense depression”. First Lord Jackie Fisher described Churchill as a megalomaniac for his comments at an Admiralty dinner where he stated “This, my God, is living history. Everything we are doing and saying is thrilling – it will be read by a thousand generations. I would not be out of this glorious delicious war for anything the world could give me.”

The press described Churchill as a posturing military adventurer and emphasized that his place should be at the Admiralty day and night. Lloyd George criticized him publicly for leaving untrained men in a lurch. Asquith called it a wicked folly, reporting that Churchill

showed a “zigzag streak of lightning in the brain”. Captain Richmond reported from Antwerp “I really believe Churchill is not sane” and that the Navy was in “lunatic hands” at that time. Bonar Law stated that Antwerp evidenced Churchill’s “entirely unbalanced mind”, while Hopwood and Beatty said he was off his head in directing his naval reserves.

At Gallipoli, Churchill ignored the technical issues about shelling being put to him by experts. During the Dardanelles campaign, Carden sent him five requests for specialist minesweepers. Instead, Churchill recruited inadequate trawlers manned by amateur fishermen, most being swept away by the currents or killed by the Turks. Had Churchill waited as requested, the mines would have been swept professionally and the Straits forced. Carden predictably suffered a nervous collapse.

This wonderful lecture by Gordon Parker was followed by a lengthy session of questions and comments from the audience. It was interesting to see that the majority of the questions concerned bipolar disorders generally, rather than comments on the personality and behaviours of that legendary figure, Winston Churchill. Perhaps the underlying factor linking these questions to the lecture was “the black dog”. After all, Winston Churchill commonly talked about his “black dog” and Professor Gordon Parker as Scientia Professor of Psychiatry at UNSW is also the Executive director of the Black Dog Institute, Sydney.

Anne Wood