

FROM RASPE TO McILROY VIA MUNCHAUSEN

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"Never in the History of Medicine have so many been so much annoyed by so few"— Richard Asher

In 1951, Richard Asher introduced to medicine a new syndrome, which he named after Baron Hieronymus Karl Friedrich, Freiherr von Munchausen¹. Thus did Richard Asher confer eponymous notoriety on a gentle nobleman whose only claim to fame was that of being an amusing raconteur. But if Richard Asher has irked the ghost of the good Baron this can be but little to the discomfort he was caused in 1785 when Rudolf Erich Raspe anonymously published a book in English entitled *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*.

Now it would appear that the Baron had fought with some distinction in the Russo-Turkish Campaign of 1738-40, and against the Swedes from 1714-43, rising to the rank of Captain. His war days over, he retired in 1760 to his estate in Bodenwerder, on the river Weser between Hanover and Cassel, where he settled down to the life of a country gentleman². We can see him after a day's hunting entertaining his friends with extravagant accounts of his military exploits and travels. A vivid imagination and a way with words earned him a local reputation as a witty and brilliant raconteur. Rudolf Raspe, who was Councillor, Professor of Antiquity and Keeper of the Collection of Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel, and a Fellow of the Royal Society, may have been among the Baron's guests. However, extravagant tastes and an inability to manage his affairs despite marrying the daughter of a wealthy Berlin physician led Raspe to embezzle the medals of his charge. Forced to flee, he came to England and was expelled from the Royal Society. Nonetheless, he managed to collaborate with Horace Walpole on the *Critical Essay on Oil Painting* and was later appointed to the assay office of a Cornish tin-mining enterprise, and it was here that he began to write the fantasies of Baron Munchausen. These fables were an instant success, and have remained so as attested by hundreds of editions and translations into almost every language. The unfortunate Baron, living peacefully on his estate, found himself the centre of unwelcome attention about which he could do very little. His misery was increased by the death of his wife, and apparently he found little consolation by marrying an eighteen-year-old who had but to wait three years to inherit his estate. Raspe

does not appear to have made much money from his best-selling fantasies (*A sequel to the adventures of Baron Munchausen* appeared in 1792) and it may have been a mining swindle in Scotland that forced him to come to Ireland where he died in 1794.

In 1915 there emerged from Donegal one named Stewart McIlroy, now presumed dead. Due to the diligent detective work of Pallis and Bamji³ he will be greeted with some interest by the shades of Asher and Raspe, though the reputation of being the greatest and most complex example of the Munchausen syndrome will hardly impress the Baron's ghost.

As many doctors dedicate their lives to Aesculapius, albeit with varying intensity, so too do certain individuals dedicate themselves to being patients. None has ever done so with such total dedication as Stewart McIlroy, and surely no one can ever hope to emulate his feats of endurance and deception.

In a career spanning 35 years he was admitted to at least 68 hospitals on no less than 207 occasions. (18 of these admissions were to Dublin hospitals.) Masquerading under 20 different names, McIlroy presented to his chosen institute with a variety of physical signs, altered and complicated by numerous iatrogenic procedures that must have fooled an inestimable number of doctors. A skilled presenter of his symptoms, he did not like exposure of his falsehoods and he discharged himself from hospital on no less than 133 occasions. There would always be evidence of recent venepuncture. He had many scars from previous laparotomies and orthopaedic procedures. He had suffered at least 48 lumbar punctures, 3 encephalograms as well as a myelography, and early on in his career he had picked up a few burr holes. A permanent tracheostomy complete with silver speaking-tube must have guaranteed his admission to many an institute, and one can only imagine how he must have intrigued many a membership-seeking doctor with his skilfully chosen selection of rather bizarre neurological signs.

Asher, in dedicating the syndrome to Baron von Munchausen, observed that "the persons affected have always travelled widely; and their stories, like those attributed to him, are both dramatic and untruthful". Although Stewart McIlroy had not travelled widely

in the international sense, he had certainly wended his way through these islands, and as other peripathetic souls gain pleasure from the fauna, the scenic beauty, or railway stations, so too must McIlroy have indulged in his chosen fancy. He must have been an authority par excellence on hospital staff, casualty departments, wards and, who knows, even operating theatres. He pursued his interest at little personal financial expense. What Stewart McIlroy cost the taxpayer is a matter of conjecture, but Pallis and Bamji estimate that the sum must run into six, possibly seven, figures. In keeping with Asher's rubric, Stewart McIlroy had a flair for the fantastic—he claimed (falsely) to have served in the armed forces and the R.A.F., and relatives had been killed by Republican "bombers and gunmen".

If Stewart McIlroy has passed away, he will be proud to have earned an epitaph in the *British Medical Journal*—"In his day he baffled, entertained, fooled and infuriated the medical and nursing staff of many hospitals." If he reads his premature obituary from some hospital bed, we can only wonder how much he could add to an incomplete and fascinating tale.

In tribute to Richard Asher, whose commonsense and amusing writings have been edited by Francis Avery Jones⁴ and are recommended reading for medical students and young doctors (and for any older doctors not wise enough to have already read them), we can only say that we have not yet answered his two basic questions—why do they do it? and how can we stop them doing it? Indeed, a quarter of a century later we can but quote, as did he, Robert Burns:

*"But human bodies are such fools
For all their colleges and schools
That when no real ills do perplex them
They make enough themselves to vex them."*

References

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3. Pallis C.A. and Bamji A.N. (1979). *Brit. med. J.*, 1, 973.
4. Avery Jones F. (1972). *Richard Asher Talking Sense*. Pitman Medical.