

# OBITUARIES

## Henry Rollin

Psychiatrist who helped transform Britain's asylums

Robert Bluglass *Warwick*

Henry Ropoport Rollin (b 16 November 1911; q Leeds 1935), d 6 February 2014.



The mental asylum belongs to a vanished era. Buildings accommodated up to 2000 patients, for whom treatment possibilities were severely limited. Supervision was carried out by untrained “attendants,” and there were few medical staff. Henry Rollin, who recently died aged 102, was one of the last to have experienced those days when the medical superintendent was sovereign over his realm, able to shape and influence every aspect of the lives of sometimes thousands of people.

The first part of Henry Rollin's career spanned the final days of these institutions, firstly at Caterham, a “mental deficiency” hospital; then at Cane Hill Hospital, Coulsdon; and finally Horton Hospital, Epsom, where he was consultant and the deputy medical superintendent from 1948 until 1975. Horton was one of five mental hospitals that the Metropolitan Asylums Board established in Epsom towards the end of the 19th century to accommodate 10 000 patients.

When Rollin joined the staff in 1948, Horton was being re-established after its use as an emergency hospital for war casualties. This provided an opportunity to introduce a more enlightened and humane approach to the care of patients, and to move away from the prison like conditions that had existed before. Rollin masterminded the redecoration of the hospital, changed the drab patient clothing, and installed comfortable furniture. He also made an effort to counter the enforced idleness that had characterised Britain's mental hospitals before the second world war. Rollin introduced a broad range of “occupational therapies.” There were new workshops, kitchens, and supervision by qualified therapists, and as many patients as possible were involved.

Rollin took much pride in these improvements and later regarded Enoch Powell's Hospital Plan of 1962 with considerable misgiving. The plan anticipated that in 10 years half the existing mental hospitals could be closed and their functions split between units in general hospitals and “community care.” Towards the end of his life his view was unchanged—he felt there was little evidence that the community did care, or that the new arrangements worked. Although there had been much to criticise, the mental hospitals at their best had offered much of value—a sense of community, companionship, and occupation—which was missing when a patient was on their own.

Rollin also deeply regretted the damage that resulted from some of the new physical methods of treatment—overmedication and use of insulin, the irreversible results of psychosurgery, and the overenthusiastic use of electroconvulsive therapy.

Henry Ropoport Rollin was born in Scotland in 1911. His father, Aron, was a Lithuanian cabinet maker and trade unionist, “one of nature's scholars,” and a bibliophile who spoke four languages fluently. He moved his family to Leeds, where Henry went to medical school at the age of 16 and was an indifferent student. His notable achievement was as lightweight boxing champion in 1932-33 of both Leeds and Northern universities. He was more interested in the theatre, opera, and concert halls than by his medical studies. He also discovered his talent for writing, contributing to the *BMJ* and other publications. The *BMJ* published his autobiography, *Festina Lente; a Psychiatric Odyssey*, in its “Memoir” series in 1990.<sup>1</sup> Rollin had not considered a career in psychiatry until he found himself appointed, “as a result of dire necessity,” as a psychiatrist with the London City Council.

During the second world war he served in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, and then completed his MD thesis on aspects of Down's syndrome. This was followed by a Fulbright fellowship to study psychosomatic medicine in the US.

At Horton Hospital, Rollin was deputy superintendent from 1948 to 1975. He found that he assessed increasing numbers of offenders with mental problems, and this kindled a new interest. His work was rewarded with a research fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford, with Professor Nigel Walker, and the publication of a book, *The Mentally Abnormal Offender and the Law*.<sup>2</sup> He was elected MRCP in 1976, and FRCP in 1983.

On retirement Rollin was appointed consultant forensic psychiatrist to the Home Office for the next 10 years. He served on mental health review tribunals, and he was the second psychiatrist to join the newly created Parole Board.

Rollin was involved in the transformation of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, finding funding and helping to establish its first home in Belgrave Square. He became the honorary librarian, study tours secretary, and a member of council. A fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, he was elected an honorary fellow on retirement, the college's highest honour. Until his

death he was the obituaries editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

At the age of 62 he married Anna-Maria Tihanyi, now a prominent anaesthetist, and they had two children and three grandchildren, the first of whom was born on his 100th birthday.

- 1 Rollin HR. *Festina lente; a psychiatric Odyssey*. London: Memoir Club Publications, British Medical Journal, 1990.
- 2 Rollin HR. *The mentally abnormal offender and the law*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1969.

Cite this as: [BMJ 2014;348:g2339](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g2339)

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