Too young for gardening

Jim Watson's former colleagues ponder his life after the Nobel prize.

Inspiring Science: Jim Watson and the Age of DNA

edited by John Inglis, Joseph Sambrook & Jan Witkowski
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Robert Olby

When you've reached your peak, some say, it's downhill all the way. So what happens when you've won a Nobel prize? You meet the press, receive congratulations, go on the lecture circuit, and then settle for a quiet life in the lab, with time for golf or gardening and perhaps an autobiography at 65. But James Watson won his Nobel at 34 — too young for an easy-going life of gardening and golf. What better activity for such a young Nobel laureate than to promote the science he believed in so passionately — molecular biology.

First came the classic textbook (*Molecular Biology of the Gene* in 1965), then his notorious best-selling autobiography (*The Double Helix*, 1968), followed by his entrepreneurial and administrative achievement in creating that heaven-on-earth for molecular biologists at the fading institute by the sea, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Finally he had a short-lived reign over the then National Center for Human Genome Research. That's more than enough for one lifetime.

Recollections of this varied career — and in particular Watson's direction of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory — form the meat of this handsomely produced book. The numerous contributors show how Watson has been a mover behind the scenes and a talent-spotter, mentoring students but not putting his name on their publications, finding grants for those in need, influencing congressional deliberations, shaping science policy, and initiating and co-authoring the textbook *Molecular Biology of the Cell* (1983). Most remarkable of all was his success in appealing to the generous spirit of the 'blue bloods' of Long Island's Gold Coast to support Cold Spring Harbor. His gaffes were overlooked and his snide remarks forgiven, for it was accepted that Watson had remarkable intuition, vision and drive.

The purpose of *Inspiring Science*, the editors write, "is not to reconstruct an academic history or an authoritative biography, but to record friendship and appreciation". Watson requested that it contain "nothing too worshipful and certainly nothing boring". So we are reminded of a number of his less attractive characteristics, notably his intolerance, bad manners and bouts of bad temper.

On the way up: Jim Watson was at Harvard before heading Cold Spring Harbor's biology laboratory.

Cross his path and there will be an explosion; try and steal his staff and you will surely be in for a devastating harangue and lasting resentment. "Jim," writes Norton Zinder, "is the only manager I know who succeeded by pure petulance." In short, he justly earned E. O. Wilson's name for him: the Caligula of biology.

Clearly this book is not a standard scientist's Festschrift. The seven scientific papers in the volume are reprints of Watson's, four of them co-authored by Crick. The structure is chronological, running from his student days to the present, and is supported by an eleven-page historical timeline. For each contributor there is a concise biographical entry to guide the reader. The contributors are former students, collaborators, colleagues (including Wilson, his Harvard opponent), associates in science policy, four members of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's board of trustees, the architect William Grover, and Bruce Alberts and Keith Roberts, co-authors of *Molecular Biology of the Cell*.

Nearly one-third of the book is about the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. This section begins with John Cairns' account of his spell as director, when its Biological Laboratory had been amalgamated with the Carnegie Institution's Department of Genetics. He describes how he kept the Biological Laboratory afloat in the 1960s while the scientific board of trustees ran rings around him, making him the fall guy, by holding back the \$25,000 that each of the eight Associated Universities had agreed to contribute to set the laboratory on its feet.

The turning point, according to Cairns, came when Bentley Glass brought the State University of New York (SUNY) into the Associated Universities. Offering to pay at once, SUNY shamed the other institutions into coughing up.

The account by Zinder, a board member from 1967 to 1986, takes us back to the earlier history of the laboratory to understand how it became so run down. It then moves on to Watson's period as director and the subsequent reorganization of the laboratory and its board of trustees.

Building on the successful format of the laboratory's earlier Festschrift to Max Delbrück, *Phage and the Origins of Molecular Biology* (1966), the editors wisely avoided including the much-publicized prelude to the discovery of the structure of DNA. Surprisingly there is no recollection from Ernst Mayr about Watson's Harvard years, nor from anyone in the university administration at that time. And was there no suitable fragment about Cold Spring Harbor from the works of the late Bentley Glass?

Multi-authorship results in differing evaluations of some historical episodes: the impact of Watson's Cold Spring Harbor lecture on DNA in 1953; the trustees' treatment of John Cairns; and the mystery of Watson's effective role as an undergraduate teacher, although, as David Botstein remarks, "the best that can be said of his lectures was that they were unpredictable."

Such differences serve to warn the reader not to take recollections on trust, but to evaluate them critically. If the book had been

presented as an academic history then the lack of exploration of more sources — including archive material from the meetings and correspondence from Harvard's biology department and Cold Spring Harbor's board of trustees — would be a concern. But as a kind of Festschrift, this volume should encourage as well as inform such a work. It will also entertain.

Inspiring Science could be read alongside Victor McElheny's biography of our subject, *Watson and DNA* (for a review see *Nature* 421, 315–316; 2003). The editors are to be congratulated on compiling and organizing such a readable and informative set of recollections that will serve very effectively the role they intended. ■

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An inside view of mental health

The Confinement of the Insane: International Perspectives, 1800–1965

edited by Roy Porter & David Wright
Cambridge University Press: 2003. 371 pp.
£50, \$70

Gerald N. Grob

The history of mental illness and psychiatry before 1960 was written within a Whiggish tradition of inevitable progress, with new psychiatric knowledge and therapies superseding ignorance and barbarism. The subsequent failure of mental hospitals to live up to this promise was attributed to short-sighted and parsimonious public policies that had led to overcrowding and neglect of therapeutic functions.

After 1960, by contrast, the history of psychiatry and mental hospitals underwent fundamental changes. A group of social and psychiatric critics launched an attack on the legitimacy of both psychiatry and mental hospitals and led the development of a quite different synthesis. In so doing they used what purported to be empirical data to support their interpretations. In Michel Foucault's eyes, for example, mental hospitals were institutions of social control that served the interests of a capitalist society that prized productivity above all else. Others, including Thomas Szasz, Erving Goffman and Thomas Scheff, emphasized the repressive nature of such institutions, and some critics even challenged the very existence of mental disorders.

The work of these critics influenced a group of historians who then developed a synthesis that was equally critical of psychiatry and mental hospitals. They emphasized

élite hegemony: people with mental illnesses were simply objects without agency. The confinement of the mentally ill in institutions reflected fears of social disorder and a desire to penalize those who did not contribute to productivity. This scholarship in some ways symbolized the triumph of ideology over reality, as their authors ignored a large body of contradictory data.

In recent years a new and different synthesis has begun to emerge. *The Confinement of the Insane*, a collection of essays by younger scholars that cover developments in no less than fourteen countries on five continents, is but one indication of new trends. Dealing with the institutions and policies of countries with differing populations, traditions and cultures, these scholars largely eschew the angry and polemical writings of the 1960s and 1970s. Basing their analyses on archival data, they present nuanced and subtle interpretations that offer fresh insight into the mental-health policies of different nations.

The authors of these essays avoid a historical analysis that assumes inevitable progress. Yet they find that many of the allegations made by the psychiatric critics lack substance. In their eyes, psychiatry was not a profession characterized solely by self-interest, nor were mental hospitals merely places of confinement for inconvenient people. In place of simplicity, these younger historians offer a complex model that grows out of deep research. They reject the claim that mental hospitals were created by hegemony-seeking élites, and insist that they were multifaceted institutions that simultaneously served caring, therapeutic and custodial functions. Indeed, these institutions were

contested arenas where families, patients, public officials and psychiatrists negotiated among themselves. Admission to the mental hospital, for example, was rarely controlled by police or officials concerned with the maintenance of public order; in most countries, families played key roles in institutionalizing their members.

Moreover, the authors' research undermines older generalizations about the composition of hospital populations. Hospital stays in nineteenth-century England, for example, were relatively brief. In most places, unmarried individuals and males had the highest rates of being institutionalized; females had lower rates, but once inside they tended to remain there longer. The oft-repeated claim that women had disproportionately high rates of incarceration is not supported by empirical data.

Nor were hospitals populated by the fringe elements of industrial society. The analysis of Canadian hospitals, for example, found that most patients were productively employed. Finally, the comparative dimensions of these essays suggests that indigenous cultures and traditions played significant roles in shaping different mental-health policies. These and other data do little to support the claims of ideologically driven scholars that mental hospitals were places where inconvenient and marginal people were incarcerated.

The essays in this volume do not lead to overarching interpretations, but nevertheless they highlight the importance of using patient records and avoiding ideological clichés. Such research can also have contemporary policy implications. Knowledge

Vincent van Gogh painted *The Garden of St Paul's Hospital at St Remy* during a spell in the asylum.

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