

Robert Burton – Pioneer of Men’s Mental Health

By Lola Milton-Jenkins

Amongst centuries of wars throughout history, poor mental health is arguably the longest-lasting and most destructive battle humanity continues to face, with many healthcare practices only recognising it as a real medical problem in the last couple hundred years. Despite its destructive nature in our lives, we continue to deny and ignore its existence, especially amongst men, of whom 40% have never spoken to anyone about their mental health, according to a recent study. As a scholar dedicating his life to studying and acknowledging mental health difficulties in men, the early psychiatrist Robert Burton was, then, ahead of his time.

Born in 1577, Robert Burton went on to matriculate at Brasenose College, Oxford at just 15 years old. After becoming a bachelor of divinity in 1614, his book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which he had worked on throughout his education, was finally published in its first edition in 1621. It was split into three key parts: the first on different types of melancholy (looking at what we would now label obsession, clinic depression etc.); the second on ways to treat it; and the third on love and religion as other ways to deal with it. Despite his instant success upon publishing, he proved his true dedication to learning about psychology, as opposed to just using the discipline for his own gain, by continuing to develop this encyclopaedia, reaching an impressive 516,384 words by its sixth edition in 1651.

What I think is particularly inspiring about Robert Burton is that he represents the constance of mental health struggles in society. He is proof that while the world around us changes, our everyday struggles stay the same. I picked Burton to research because like myself, Burton matriculated at Brasenose, discovered his life’s interest in psychology (he found his fascination in studying melancholy “deducted from the main channel of my studies”), and came to terms with his own struggles with depression. This is all the more impressive considering the prejudice he would have faced, having been so unusually open about his difficulties; he admitted: “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.” In today’s academia, such a revelation may not be especially shocking, but it was revolutionary considering the attitude of society towards men’s mental health at the time. Contemporary literature from the 17th century shows that whilst men were considered the strong supporter of the family, it was their wives who were implied to often suffer from mental health issues, such as through language referring to “ailments of the mind”.

To put it simply, Robert Burton was a unique academic in his determination to study a science which was shunned by much of society, whilst also being publicly vulnerable about his own struggles. He both strove to learn more about his own melancholy through his studies, whilst also influencing the future of academic study in a number of disciplines, as Susan Wells notes: “These discourses informed a range of disciplines, from divinity to medicine.” By sharing knowledge and breaking stereotypes relating to the expectation for men to be silent on the topic of mental health, Robert Burton was a pioneer of men’s mental health.

Bibliography

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