

Special Feature on Survivors History

1: A poet's view of the Survivors History Group by Júlia Sorribes and Phil Ruthen

Survivors of the UK's mental health system rewrite their history

Since April 2005, a group of mental health system service-users/survivors and historians have been putting together an archive of documents and artworks of all kinds to reflect the shared experiences of people involved in the wider mental health political movements in UK history.



From left to right: Frank Bangay, Mandy Chainey, Peter Campbell and Phil Ruthen at the signing of Phil's contract, in March 2008.

Poet and former mental health service-user Philip Ruthen was employed in 2008 to assist the development of the project. In an interview with journalist Júlia Sorribes, he explained that the Survivors History Group aims to 'recall the real lives of people who have lived in a mental health setting from their own point of view, not that more often presented by the staff or academics'.

This initiative stemmed from a meeting at the end of November 2004, called by mental health experts Thurstine Basset and Peter Lindley at London's Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (now The Centre for Mental Health). The group was formed on Thursday 21 April 2005 at what was then the Mental After-Care Association (MACA) in Lincoln's Inn (now Together Working for Wellbeing, in Old Street, London). MACA had appointed survivor activist Ann Beales 'to support service-user involvement nationally', and she arranged that Together would provide a base for the group, without interfering in any way with its independence. To launch the group, Survivor historian Peter Campbell outlined five significant events in the history of the movement, and people viewed an impromptu museum put together by participants, each bringing a couple of items from their own collections.

In January 2006 the Survivors History Group published its official manifesto. In this document, the group asserts

that they seek to 'record, preserve, collate and make widely available the diversity and creativity of service-users/survivors through personal accounts, writings, poetry, art, music, drama, photography ... and all other expressions'.

Phil Ruthen explained that in 2008 the group's intention was to obtain sufficient funding, including seeking donations, and to maintain and develop its online archive at www.studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm. Within this website, people from the service-user community can interact and will be increasingly able to provide a wide range of material – from DVDs to photographs, poems or pamphlets – as the practicalities of physical archive facilities are explored.

He also explained that the Survivors History Group is a nationwide initiative and stressed that service users not only from London but also from places like Manchester, Scotland or Birmingham, for example, have a lot more to say about the survivors' movement, being at times 'overlooked in the UK drift towards increased centralisation of policies and facilities'. People around the country are being encouraged to find and list items and documents they already possess, with a view to these eventually being added to the archive.

One of Phil's suggestions was an Internet forum that would allow people in all parts of the country (or, indeed, the world) to discuss survivor history and the issues related to it in an open, democratic and de-centralised way. This was established at <http://groups.google.com/group/survivor-history>. The forum now has about 70 members and active discussions most days.

Mental patients in story, poetry and song

The poet, who has been a mental health campaigner for more than a decade, points out that the social and political side of the group is important: 'What we want is to preserve materials that may be lost to history, make them available for future research and give a wider perspective.'

While supporting the group, Philip Ruthen continues fulfilling the role of a trustee in Survivors' Poetry, a national organisation set up in November 1991 to promote poetry and the literary arts 'by and for survivors of mental distress' (according to its current Chief Executive Officer, the distinguished poet and critic, Simon Jenner). Survivors' Poetry, and the quarterly magazine *Poetry Express*, can be reached at www.survivorspoetry.com.

Much of the inspiration for Survivors' Poetry came from a decade of music and poetry gigs organised by Frank Bangay in aid of the organisations: Preservation of the Rights of Patients in Therapy (PROMPT) and the Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression (CAPO). Frank, a historian of the working-class roots of the Survivor movement, once said, 'Our poetry and other forms of creativity are our only voice, and the only way we really have of communicating our experiences.'

This interest in creativity at the core of survivor history was reflected in the 'Pageant of Survivor History – Mental Patients in Poetry, Story and Song from the 18th to 21st Century', which the history group organised together with the Friends of East End Lunatics (FEEL) in the historic Kingsley Hall, in March, 2010. Much of this performance, including

some of the music, is preserved at <http://studymore.org.uk/pageant.htm>.

Although it proved impossible to secure funding for a paid employee, the Survivors History Group has found that it can work effectively with the unpaid energies of its members and the funding it has secured. Phil Ruthen remains a member of the group but has now moved on to earn his living in other Survivor initiatives.

2. *Asylum to Action* by Helen Spandler: A review by Mark Cresswell



Helen Spandler

Survivors' history and the symbols of a movement

Subtitled: *Paddington Day Hospital, Therapeutic Communities and Beyond*, this book is a superb addition to a small but significant genre – the study of political activism within the mental health system. The exemplary text of this genre remains Peter Sedgwick's *Psychopolitics* (from 1982), and it is to Spandler's credit that her book deserves mentioning in the same breath. I should also mention the following: Kathryn Church's *Forbidden Narratives* (1995), Nick Crossley's *Contesting Psychiatry* (2006), and Linda J. Morrison's *Talking Back to Psychiatry* (2005).

Briefly, Helen tells the following story. During the decade spanning the mid-1960s to mid-1970s – until its closure and the dismissal of its Medical Director, Julian Goodburn – The Therapeutic Community (TC) at the Paddington Day Hospital in London was amongst the most radical of its kind. Its closure followed an official inquiry in 1979. For that decade or so Goodburn implemented an innovative group psychoanalytic approach within the TC. This stressed patient autonomy and the need to combine non-medical recognition of human distress alongside a confrontation with the social and political reality 'beyond'. In addition to its well-attested radicalism as a TC, Paddington was also noteworthy for helping to facilitate the development of the 'User/Survivor' movement in Britain, especially the Mental Patients' Union (MPU). The MPU was formed in 1973, specifically originating in protests, during 1971/72, against

closing down the Paddington TC. *Asylum to Action* surveys the history of that TC, from inception to closure, including 'the victorious protest' and the formation of the MPU.

In a sense, *Asylum to Action* works in 'major' and 'minor' keys: if the history of Paddington as a TC is the major axis, the formation of the MPU is the minor axis, although Spandler welds together both stories by treating the physical space of Paddington as a 'paradoxical space' through which radical mental health movements (TCs and 'Survivor' movements) appeared together for the first time.

At first sight, Spandler develops the narrative of Paddington in a straightforward and linear way. However, she has a deeper purpose concerning the historical status of a previous and, as it turns out, rival account of Paddington as a TC – that located in Claire Baron's well-known and contrastingly titled *Asylum to Anarchy* (1987). It is important to appreciate the sense in which Spandler invokes the rival concept of 'action' against Baron's concept of 'anarchy'.



There are two points to make about this contrast. First, and most obviously, Spandler's account displays the wider historical compass insofar as, compared to Baron's work, it incorporates the *entire* history of Paddington, that is from 1962 to 1979. Her analysis extends to include the symbolic and disputed function it enjoys to the present day. On the other hand, Baron's book is limited by its narrative of 'decline and fall', which is to say, to the controversy surrounding its practice in the post-MPU period (1973–79). It was then that Medical Director Goodburn was accused and pronounced guilty of unprofessional conduct, and the Paddington TC closed down.

Baron suggests a *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* scenario in which institutional power, masquerading as 'therapy', systematically denies the 'lived experience' of the mental patient – to the latter's detriment. Spandler recognises that Baron's sociologically determined narrative in *Asylum to Anarchy* is very compelling. So too is Ken Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* novel (1962) and Milos Forman's film (1975), which was released to popular and critical acclaim during the period surveyed by Baron. After all, 'decline and fall' is an aesthetically satisfying 'tale'.

But is it *over*-compelling? And, as much to the point, is the narrative *true*? It is a mark of Spandler's subtlety that she is at least as concerned with the first question as with the second. She argues that Baron's account functions as nothing less than a 'consumable pill of history'. By this, she means that the narrative of 'decline and fall' cannot be separated from its historical context. This was the resurgence of an ideology of the New Right, obsessed with 'order' and abhorring 'radicalism'. Baron's simplistic condemnation of 'anarchy' – expressed in her title – chimed harmoniously with the Reaganite/Thatcherite mantra that

'society was becoming ungovernable', to the degree that left-wing radicalism needed 'a summary purge'.

Spandler is persuasive that 'the truth about Paddington' is far more complex and disputed than Baron allows, and it is certainly possible to oppose the fatalistic narrative of 'decline and fall' with a more progressive narrative which preserves Paddington's radicalism as that 'political action' which her own book's title invokes. She sums up this counter-narrative in the following way:

[A] struggle for greater democracy neither surrenders itself to its illusions nor aspires to a permanent substitute. This means developing spaces that enable greater democratic dialogue While it remains important to develop specific therapeutic communities ... it is perhaps more important to ... cultivate the radical spirit necessary to enable the creation of wider critical communities ... both within and beyond TCs.

Questions of history (1)

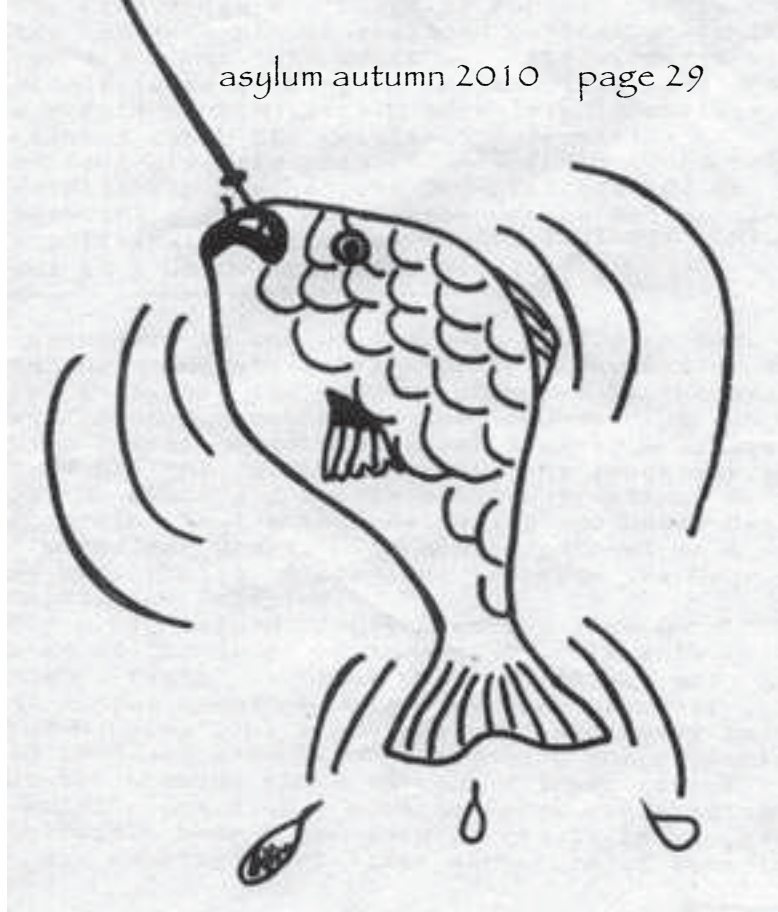
Yet the questions raised by the book are tricky. Spandler recognises the extent to which *all* history is connected to a narrative genre which somehow 'fixes' its meaning. This does not mean that 'the facts' do not matter but it does mean that we have to relinquish any idea that the task of historical writing is simply to 'pile up the facts' in such a way as to produce an *indisputable* account of the past. The historian EH Carr once suggested that facts are not like 'fish on the fishmonger's slab' – a 'fishy' symbolisation to which I'll return – and 'postmodernism' tends to push this idea of 'history-as-interpretation' towards *relativism*. Why 'relativism'? The risk here is that in opposing one narrative to another, in opposing a narrative about 'the flourishing of democracy' against a narrative of 'decline and fall' – i.e., of 'action' against 'anarchy' – we lose sight of that reputed criterion, 'the indisputable facts', which may permit us to adjudicate between the two.

This is precisely the sort of 'risk' I want to address. I aim to pursue this not just in terms of the Baron/Spandler encounter, but in terms of a wider set of questions provoked, not only by *Asylum to Action*, but also by recent reflections on the history of the 'survivor' movement undertaken by the Survivors History Group and by other academic work on political activism within psychiatry. Taken together these sources provoke a relay race of relevant questions.

For instance, when we ask about 'the truth' of events – by which I refer to 'the indisputable facts' – what are we actually asking? Are we suggesting that there is *one* such truth (Spandler's or Baron's), and that it is true for all time? Or that there may be a plurality of truths (Spandler's *and* Baron's *and* anyone else's) each of which is either: (i) equally true, or else; (ii) may be treated as such, there being no adequate criterion for adjudication (i.e., precisely the risk of relativism, noted above)?

'The Fish-on-a-hook'

I address these questions by analysing what is often taken as the founding symbol of The Survivor Movement: the 'fish-caught-on-a-hook'. This symbol was the cover image of the 1972/1973 manifesto of a group of people linked to Paddington Day Hospital called *The Need for a Mental*



Patients' Union.

That symbol – and its significance – has been much discussed. The indisputable historical 'facts', though, seem to be these. When it employed the symbol of 'the fish-on-a-hook', the manifesto cited the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Karl Menninger. His 1930 book, *The Human Mind* opened with this analogy:

When a trout rising to a fly gets hooked on a line and finds himself unable to swim about freely, he begins a fight which results in struggles and splashes and sometimes escapes. Often, of course, the situation is too tough for him.

In the same way, the human being struggles with his environment and with the hooks that catch him. Sometimes he masters his difficulties; sometimes they are too much for him. His struggles are all the world sees and it usually misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one.

The sense of this symbolisation is simple enough: what is called 'mental illness' is an attempt to cope with a hostile environment – a coping mechanism which is susceptible to misunderstanding and pathologising by those with power.

Here we encounter what later became the classically Laingian, anti-psychiatric motif concerning 'the intelligibility of madness'. Fast-forward to the year 2000 and we find 'The Fish Pamphlet' being reproduced by Mad Pride, one of the most significant recent survivor organisations, with the following words:

This now rare document, also known as The Fish Pamphlet, is said by some to mark the beginning of the organised 'survivor movement' in Britain as it can be recognised today. The document is therefore of great historical and political importance ... Although some of the following material and the language used may appear dated, it is a timely reminder of where it is

that the 'survivor movement' has come from, and sets the context for the book Mad Pride: A celebration of mad culture in more ways than one.

It is certain that these three different appearances of the 'fish-on-a-hook' symbolisation are 'indisputable facts': Menninger was one of the most famous psychiatrists of his day, so it began its life within mainstream psychiatry, but later it was re-articulated by the social movement, where it serves a symbolic function to this day.

One disputed issue, however, concerns the alleged 'Marxist' status of the 'fish-on-a-hook' motif. As seems clear, the framers of the MPU *Fish Pamphlet* were largely Marxist-influenced, if not themselves Marxist, and the text is explicitly so. The symbol of the 'fish-on-a-hook' serves to characterise the fate of mental patients as mainly members of the working class, under a system of capitalist social relations for which psychiatry is a subcontractor for social control. However, this proves itself a prime example of why historians should never confuse the rhetoric of a text – particularly a 'founding statement', and including its symbolisation – with the ideology and practice of the actual movement. The MPU was clearly not a Marxist organisation: it quickly rejected *The Fish Pamphlet* in favour of the more liberal *Declaration of Intent*. And it replaced the 'fish-on-a-hook' symbolisation with that of a human face enmeshed in a spider's web.



The work of the Survivors History Group, and its associated Mental Health History Timeline, is salutary here. Through its digitised primary sources and first-hand eye-witness testimonies, the Timeline shows that not only was the Marxist influence of *The Fish Pamphlet* ephemeral but its 'fish-on-a-hook' symbolisation was not even the only 'fishy' metaphor canvassed by the MPU! For, at meetings in April 1973 which adopted *The Declaration of Intent* and the 'face-in-a-spider's-web' motif noted above, an *alternative* symbol was proposed but rejected – a symbol which some described as 'a very beautiful coloured fish'.

And, in a dénouement to this history, which displays a fine ironical sense, that 'beautiful symbol' – rejected for the sake of a sinister 'face-in-a-spider'sweb' – has, as Júlia Sorribes and Phil Ruthen describe, been adopted as the *contemporary* symbolisation of the Survivors History Group:

Questions of History (2)

In light of this brief history of a movement's symbolisation – and keeping in view Spandler's *Asylum to Action* – let's finish by addressing that relay race of questions noted above, apropos 'the truth' of a movement.

In a sense, what the Baron/Spandler encounter and the history of the fish symbolisation demonstrate is that 'the indisputable facts' are a moveable feast. History 'moves' because we do indeed discover *more* 'facts'. Spandler substantially *adds to* Baron's account in the same way that the Survivors History Group *adds to* already existing academic accounts of the MPU. In one sense, then, 'the truth of the movement' is progressive because it's cumulative.

Yet there is a right way and a wrong way to establish this point. The wrong way is to present this history of the movement as a positivistic 'story of progress': to believe the risk of relativism is removed simply by due diligence to 'the indisputable facts'.

It is not. And the reason is that the history of democratic societies – those which pursue, as 'Survivors' do, what Claude Lefort calls the 'adventure of rights' – is every bit as much 'symbolic' as it is 'real'. By this I mean that (with respect to Baron and Spandler) what I have called the 'narrative' dimension, and (with respect to the 'fish' motif) what I have called the 'symbolic' dimension, are as much a part of the movement's history as any 'indisputable fact'.

Actually, they are more *politically* salient insofar as disputes over the 'symbolic' dimension – as to whether Paddington *is or is not* a narrative of 'decline and fall', or whether the 'fish' symbol *is or is not* a Marxist motif – provide movements with what Lefort calls their 'theatre of contestation', within which political 'action' is defined and formed. Spandler calls this 'theatre of contestation' a 'paradoxical space'. It is paradoxical precisely because it presents us with alternatives for political action all of which cannot be 'true' but *between* which we do have to choose. In this sense, 'relativism' is not so much a problem for historical writing as it is the precondition for a political choice: as Spandler says, a precondition for 'action'.

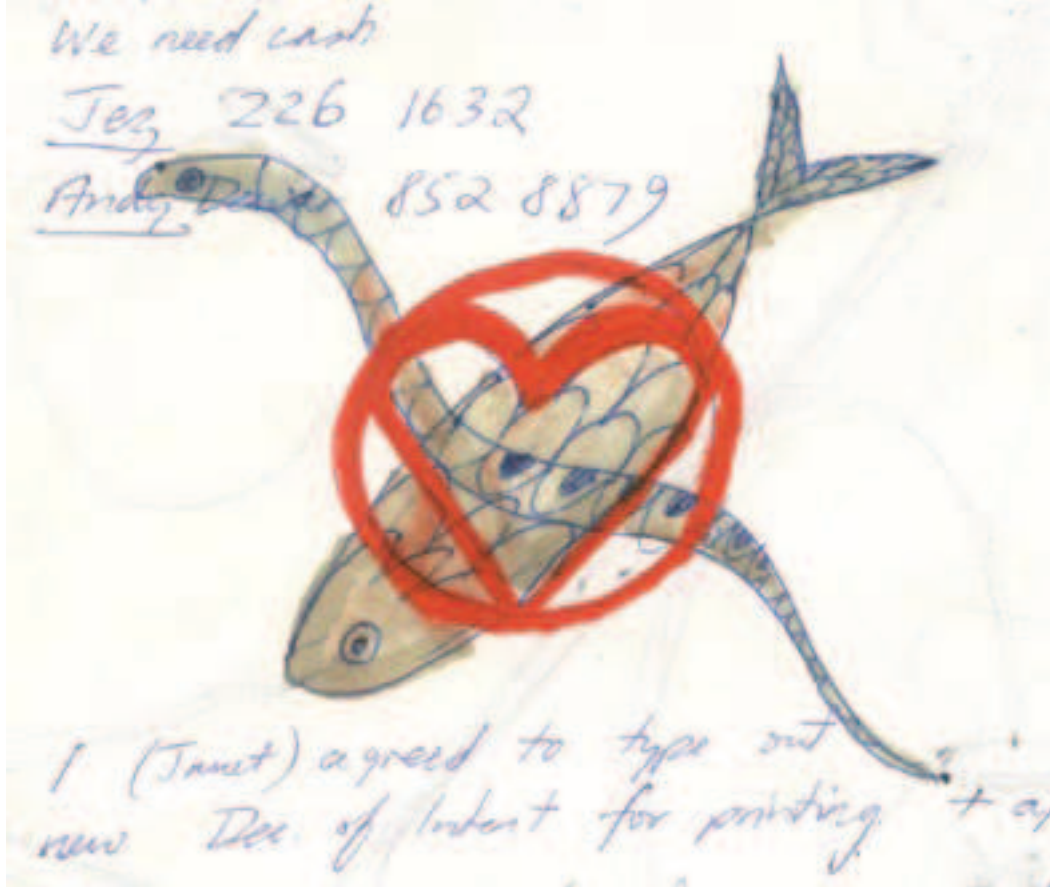
In a 'paradoxical space', it is hard to cope with what Lefort calls 'complications'. The 'simplifications of history' – e.g., notions of 'decline and fall' – are more reassuring. But 'the complication' is this. I do not advocate a simplistic duality between 'the symbolic' and 'the real' – between, say, 'the indisputable facts' and the 'values' that surround them. Rather, I hold that the dimension of 'indisputable facts' is *interpenetrated* by the 'symbolic' dimension – by the dimension of 'narrative' – to the extent that in the 'theatre of contestation' there only really exists, in practice, *disputable* 'facts'. In any case, all such 'facts' (if 'facts' they be), are capable of disputation.

And that, I conclude, is a good thing. Simply because Spandler inhabits a 'theatre of contestation' for which that eternal 'decline and fall' is antithetical; simply because she detects in that narrative another unspoken 'decline', that of the Left and of what might be called the 'great moving right show', she is at pains to dispute it. Simply because the Survivors History Group, through its primary sources, through its eye-witness testimonies, inhabits a 'paradoxical space' for which the symbol of the 'fish-on-a-hook' is opposed by the 'beautiful fish that swims free', they are able to reclaim the 'adventure of rights' which vulgar Marxism would simplify out of existence.

Asylum to Action comes replete with 'complications'. And that's an indisputable fact.

Helen Spandler: *Asylum to Action: Paddington Day Hospital, Therapeutic Communities and Beyond*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.

The Survivors History Group website and timeline can be found at: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>. The archive includes copies of articles by Mark Cresswell, including a fuller version of this one.



3: The symbol for the Survivors History Group

The picture that has become the *logo* of the Survivors History Group was painted by Janet Forge in April 1973. It was intended for the newly formed Mental Patients' Union (MPU), the case for which had been made in a pamphlet decorated with a fish on a hook. What the symbolism means is not recorded, but Andrew Roberts, who was a member of the MPU, has his own theory: 'In it nothing twitches on a hook and nothing struggles to be free of a net. The fish swims free in the water, the snake moves free in the grass and the heart beats free in the breast. We are now free.'

The image was not adopted by the MPU, which instead chose an illustration depicting the face of a patient caught in a spider's web. Janet wrote the minutes of a meeting on her discarded artwork and, in this form, it was preserved in the archives of the MPU. The Survivors History Group has now recovered Janet's artwork to incorporate it into its identity. Andrew calls it 'The Love Fish'.

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<http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>**

