



Psychiatrist of America: The Life of Harry Stack Sullivan, by Helen Swick Perry, Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge, 1982, 462 pp.

“A well-written biography,” wrote Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century, “is almost as rare as a well-spent one.” Perry’s book, manifestly a labor of love, is a well-written biography. I once heard a bookseller say that biographies should be printed in black and red, black for the truth and red for the fiction. Readers should be warned, he thought.

Psychiatrist of America, a fact-laden book, is 462 pages of convincing black ink.

Black is the color of the Harvard University Press production, but the dye of Sullivan’s soul was many-colored. Unlike Freud’s life, which by comparison was ordered and conventional, Sullivan’s was a series of emergencies and successes wrung from anxieties. Unlike Freud’s life, which looms over us like a skyscraper in a great city, Sullivan’s life is more like an ordinary building – perhaps a venerable brownstone saved from being an eyesore with great effort. The attraction of Sullivan’s life is that it is like ordinary lives – our lives – lives that may make it and then again may not. “We are much more simply human than otherwise,” wrote Sullivan, “be we happy and successful, contented and detached, miserable and mentally disordered” His own life fluctuated between these extremes.

In Chenango County of upstate New York, a rural and remote county, Harry Stack Sullivan and his family found themselves outsiders. It was a defeated county, a county that did not produce a single city and watched American Progress pass it by. The Yankees blamed the immigrant Irish and grieved that the “Irish came and built the railroads and never left.” All four of Sullivan’s grandparents were Irish immigrants who had fled the potato famine.

Chenango County was the setting for Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. Even today in the 1980s, Perry reports, the county newspaper reflects a “peculiar fascination for suicide and homicide.” Chenango County had the highest rate of suicide of any rural county in the United States during the years that Sullivan was a child. One week after his mother’s death the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on St. Patrick’s Day within sight of the Sullivan farm.

Even within his own family, the boy Harry was stranger. His mother, who mysteriously left when he was 2, till about the age of 4, was, in her son’s words, “a complaining semi-invalid with chronic resentment at the humble family situation.” She viewed Harry through the distancing of fantasy: “[My mother] had no use for me except as a clotheshorse to hang an elaborate pattern of illusion.” All day, his father was busy and withdrawn. This left only his grandmother, who spoke Gaelic, not English. Clara Thompson re-

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ports that the boy's close friends were the livestock of the farm. Before going to school at age 5½ he was dependent "on a rich fantasy life."

School was a relief from the isolation of the home and farm. Not that the boy was a great social success. He wasn't, especially with his alienating Irish accent, picked up from his grandmother. But he was eager for knowledge, had an early interest in science, and delighted in using words derived from Latin and Greek. There was one "chum," a Charles Bellinger, five years older, with whom he was close. Later Dr. Sullivan would say that the intimacy of this relationship was crucial to his survival.

He did survive, but barely. He survived a world in which his father was considered the "village drunk" and his mother "sharp, withdrawn and queer." On top of that, he was the only Roman Catholic child in the school and almost friendless, though respected by the teachers. It is not surprising that Dr. Sullivan's colleagues would later describe him as one of three kinds of characters: "a withdrawn and cantankerous drunk; a somewhat pretentious high-stepper and sophisticate; the kindest and most considerate man who ever lived." Perry reports that he seldom showed all three sides to the same person.

At 17, Sullivan graduated from Smyrna High School and left for the wide world, on his way to becoming the famous Dr. Sullivan, shaper of American psychiatry and master clinician. His life, unlike Freud's, wound through emotional failure (at Cornell University), one or more schizophrenic breaks, disappearance for two years (Perry conjectures that he was a patient at Bellevue), delayed graduation from a second-rate medical school (he called it a "diploma mill"), "drift[ing] around from one dreary job to another," and a strong "fondness" for brandy.

By the time he began his productive professional life in 1921, at almost 30 years of age, his life was half over. The dramatic logic of his first 30 years was inclined more towards tragedy than towards the lovely pages of *Psychiatry*, the journal he fashioned, and the poetic wisdom of

The infant seeing for the first time the full moon reaches for it. Nothing transpires. He utters a few goos and nothing transpires; then he starts to cry in a rage, and the whole household is upset. But he does not get the moon, and the moon becomes marked unattainable.

(Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry)

At Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland, he showed a different kind of poetic wisdom in his treating of "untreatable" schizophrenics. A basically lonely man sensed that the "lonely ones," the withdrawn psychotics, were suffering from an illness the inner surface of which he knew. Drawing on his own past, he intuited an interpersonal solution for schizophrenia. What if the six lonely young men on the ward, protected from the condescension of the rest of the hospital, had a deficiency disease, i.e.,



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the lack of intimacy? Why not train a special band of “assistants,” lower-echelon staff, who wouldn’t frighten away the lonely ones? Why not create a tiny world in a small alcove of a large hospital where the sick could find intimacy as he himself had had with Charles Bellinger? “Intimacy is that type of situation involving two people which permits validation of all components of personal worth.”

Perry reports that Sullivan came to Sheppard a novice in psychiatry, but that he left eight years later a legend in both the clinical world and the world of the social sciences.

He may not have felt it, but he had “made it.” Yet, success was not linear and neat; there were many fluctuations: “. . . happy and successful, contented and detached, miserable and mentally disordered.” He made it as a consultant to the White House, but then there was the bankruptcy, or was it two bankruptcies? There was the creation of the Washington School of Psychiatry and the journal, *Psychiatry*, but he failed as a writer of books. At his death, 150 patients depended on him as a consultant, but friends who had loaned him money would not get it back.

He became an important neo-Freudian, this graduate of the defunct Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery, and a master in the “most exciting field in the world . . . on the basis of its complexity.”

A biographer is an artist whose raw material is documents, newspapers, interview notes, photographs, memories. Out of this heap comes the shape of a man’s life. Helen Swick Perry has given shape to a disordered life. She has a special sense of her subject, having known him personally and having common roots in rural New York. She writes of Chenango County as if she too knew something of the isolation and despair of the hill villages.

Sullivan, who emotionally was more of a Quaker than a practicing Catholic, requested that he be given a Catholic burial. “Of all the church services,” he said, “I prefer the Catholic because that service is the most unemotional, most impersonal, and beautiful.” Perry’s style is the austere style of the Mass, deep feeling managed by slow movement, a movement of partial impartiality. Her style is quiet, yet vivid, with one adjective doing the work of a sentence.

Such is Perry’s style and achievement in this fact-laden book of 20 years’ labor. Perry, who was managing editor of *Psychiatry*, and who stitched together Sullivan’s posthumous books, has given us a biography, great in its kind, of a life great in its kind.

Let me end as I began with a quotation from Thomas Carlyle. “There is no heroic poem in the world but is at bottom a biography, the life of a man; . . . there is no life of a man, faithfully recorded, but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed.” Helen Swick Perry has written an unrhymed heroic poem – the life of a man, a life *in-between*, with too much weakness for self-satisfaction and with too much pride for peace of soul.

In 1949, Harry Stack Sullivan died in a hotel room in Paris, alone. May



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he now be at peace with his mythological ancestor, “the West Wind, the horse that runs with the Earth into the future.”

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