

***The Father of Canadian Psychiatry: Joseph Workman.* By  
Christine I. M. Johnston. (Victoria: Ogden Press, 2000. 198 p.  
ISBN 0-96865580-7. \$19.95)**

James E. Moran

Volume 26, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800453ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800453ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Moran, J. E. (2002). Compte rendu de [*The Father of Canadian Psychiatry: Joseph Workman.* By Christine I. M. Johnston. (Victoria: Ogden Press, 2000. 198 p. ISBN 0-96865580-7. \$19.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 26, 129–131.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800453ar>

**Medicine / Médecine**

*The Father of Canadian Psychiatry: Joseph Workman.* By Christine I. M. Johnston. (Victoria: Ogden Press, 2000. 198 p. ISBN 0-96865580-7. \$19.95)

There is an old adage in biographical history that a healthy distance from one's subject is necessary in order to avoid an essentially hagiographical contribution to the field. While Christine Johnston's book is certainly guilty of this academic misdemeanour, it is also the case that

Joseph Workman, the subject of this biography, is indeed difficult to dislike! Even those far more critical than Johnston whose works deal with madness in Canada during the Workman era end up with a certain respect for what seemed to be a truly compassionate and dedicated psychiatrist, reformer and physician. Johnston's book should be viewed as important to historians of science, medicine and technology, not for its cutting-edge historiographical or analytical insights, but for its rigorous research into the life of this important Victorian Canadian, and the connections that it makes between Workman's medical and scientific work, and other important aspects of his life.

Of major importance in this regard were Workman's Unitarian religious convictions, which fostered a dedication to the support of progressive social and political issues in Upper Canada. According to Johnston, the Workman's Unitarian principles led to his successful involvement in "controversial issues such as free and non-sectarian education, public health and sanitation, cooperative banking, and the temperance movement" (p. 12). For example, Workman was the main founder of the first Unitarian congregation in Toronto in 1845, and the chairman of the first board of education in Upper Canada.

According to Johnston, this religious outlook and its political manifestations worked in Workman's favour in his chosen professional fields of medicine and, ultimately, of psychiatry. He established a good relationship with John Rolf, liberal reformer and past participant in the 1837 Rebellions. Rolf invited Workman to teach at his Toronto School of Medicine in 1847. This added an instructional dimension to Workman's family medical practice which he has established the year before. His energy and talent in medicine, along with his growing reform connections, and an ability to deal with influential conservative physicians like Dr. Widmer, led to his key role in establishing the Emigrant Hospital in Toronto, and to his appointment as permanent superintendent of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto from 1854 to 1875.

Workman's understanding of mental illness was in most respects unremarkable for his time, combining a belief in the "physical predisposition" to madness with the conviction that institutional moral therapy was the best therapeutic milieu. Yet, even at the asylum, Johnston gives the reader the impression that Workman's Unitarian principles came to the fore in his practical and humane response to his patients. For the most part, Workman was not a proponent of strong pharmaceutical treatments, yet he was willing to grapple with, and then set aside, his strong temperance convictions in order to experiment with the therapeutic effects of alcohol lauded elsewhere by asylum superintendents. Furthermore, his distain of corruption and political patronage no doubt led to internal reforms in the asylum that improved the organizational and

functional nature of the institution. Johnston also points out that he was a hands-on psychiatrist who spend many extra hours with the institution's patient population.

While Johnston's book has the tendency to slide into an antiquarian approach to Workman and his Victorian world, it is a biography which is able to place Workman's medical and scientific achievements into the context of the rest of his life experiences. In so doing it offers an implicit reminder to researchers in the field that in Victorian Canada, science and medicine were informed and shaped in important ways by prevailing religious and social cultures.

James E. Moran

**Biographical Note:** James Moran's most recent publications include, "The Signal and the Noise: The Historical Epidemiology of Insanity in Antebellum New Jersey," *History of Psychiatry* (forthcoming); and with David Wright, "The Confinement of the Mad in Victorian Canada," in Roy Porter and David Wright eds., *The Confinement of the Insane, 1800–1965 : International Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). *Address:* History Department, University of Prince Edward Island, 550 University Ave., Charlottetown (Prince Edward Island) C1A 4P3, Canada.