

# **Dr Sargant and Mr Sleep**

*The Sleep Room:  
A Very British Medical Scandal*

Jon Stock

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## **Anthony Frewin**

**I**n the late 1950s and 1960s Dr William Sargant was the media's go-to expert on everything – from psychiatry and mental illness to 'possession' and brain-washing. He was imposing and authoritative and looked lugubrious and simian. (This last is actress Celia Imrie's description. She was a patient of his – though victim might be a better description.) He was rarely questioned and it was assumed that, behind closed doors, he was a miracle worker with the mentally ill.

In fact, behind those closed doors, he was experimenting with his patients, unregulated and often without the individual's agreement, and continually circumventing rules, regulations and prohibitions whenever it suited him. And experimenting is the right word. If he believed certain things would work, then he would try them and see. Failure would be down to the patient; success was his alone.

What was his theory of the mind? (Though *theory* might dignify and elevate his thinking, such as it was.) It was quite simple and, shorn of psychiatric and psychoanalytic baggage, it is revealed in the title of an early book he co-authored, *An Introduction to Physical Methods of Treatment in Psychiatry*.<sup>1</sup> That was it: drugs, ECT, lobotomies, etc. Forget about talking it through on a couch. Chemistry, electricity and scalpels to the rescue.

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<sup>1</sup> William Sargant and Eliot Slater. Edinburgh and London: E. and S. Livingstone, 1944. There were several subsequent editions. Slater was Sargant's clinical director at the Belmont Hospital and doesn't appear to have opposed, or even curtailed, Sargant's cavalier attitude to patients. He was also active in the British Eugenics Society and thought we could learn a thing or two from Germany's approach to the question in the 1930s . . .

The Sleep Room of the title was Ward Five, situated at the top of the Royal Waterloo Hospital on the south bank of the Thames in London. It's the 1960s. The room exists in a perpetual darkness. Several women are asleep. They will be woken up, given electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), then put to sleep again with sedative and anti-depressant drugs. This would go on for days, weeks, and sometimes months – depending on Sargant's reading of the individual.

Several chapters are given over to disturbing first-hand accounts by women who were confined to the Sleep Room. It's unfathomable that this 'treatment' was allowed to continue for so long.

The Sleep Room was possibly funded by the intelligence services while Ewen Cameron's very similar Sleep Room in Montreal, which was run at the same time, most certainly was. (Stock gives a detailed account of Cameron and MKULTRA.)

Jon Stock is an assiduous and diligent researcher, and his study is not only a biography of Dr Sargant but also an examination of the rise and fall in the twentieth century of the physical methods used in the treatment of mental illness. This is a rich work and a short review such as this would struggle to do it justice.

The intelligence services – both in the UK and the USA – weave in and out of Sargant's career rather like the holly and the ivy. Certain things can be established, otherwise it's circumstantial and inferred.

Shortly after an article that Sargant had co-authored with Eliot Slater appeared in the *Lancet* in 1940, he received a letter from Colonel John Rawlings Rees<sup>2</sup> who was a consultant in the Directorate of Army Psychiatry. The article had aroused Rees's interest because it discussed the use of sodium amytal in 'unlocking' memories. The colonel had immediately seen the military/intelligence potential of the drug. Sargant was now on Whitehall's radar. As Stock writes, 'For the next thirty years various government agencies, including the intelligence services, would turn to him for advice and help'. (p. 103) These included Porton Down, where Sargant was involved in the non-consensual administering of LSD to soldiers.

Sargant and his wife appear to have been 'swingers' and this 'liberated' attitude extended, in Sargant's case, to books – namely novels. Stock recounts Sargant's wife Peggy showing around a prospective buyer of their property in St John's Wood and the buyer attempted to take out a book from the library

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<sup>2</sup> Who he? Stock informs us that Rees was one of the psychiatrists who helped the intelligence services debrief Rudolf Hess after he had flown to Scotland. He 'oversaw' the mental health of Hess for the next few years until his appearance at the Nuremberg trials in 1946. At the trial, amongst the psychiatrists evaluating Hess' mental state was Sargant's Canadian friend, Ewen Cameron.

and 'Will's collection of pornography cascaded around Peggy's feet' (Stock quoting a neighbour). This mention of pornography and Sargant rang a bell. I recalled my bibliographer friend, Pat Kearney, mentioning this to me in the early 1980s. I contacted Pat, and he supplied this recollection:

A bookseller friend phoned me one day at my place in Delancey Street [Camden Town] telling me that Sargant was getting rid of his porn collection and wanted to know if I'd take it off his hands, *gratis*. Naturally, I agreed and turned up Sargant's house to inspect the treasures. I was disappointed. The bulk of it consisted of 'Soho Bibles' [typescripts] or else poor facsimiles of ripped-off American pornographic novels with new wrappers. I kept the few Olympia Press titles but gave all the other stuff to the British Library in two large suitcases. Since none of the titles have cropped up in their catalogue, I must assume the books were either destroyed or, more probably, shipped off to Kinsey [the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University] who aren't as particular as the BL.

As for the date, that I can't pin down with any accuracy, except that it was probably in the later 1970s, and just before *The Private Case*<sup>3</sup> came out. I was living on Delancey Street at the time. The number of books is also vague. Certainly, enough to fill two decent-sized suitcases to a point where a taxi was necessary. And so far as I can recall there was no particular lurch in their theme.

I met both Sargant and his wife and was treated to at least two high-octane gin-and-tonics. His wife I thought rather attractive, a blonde if memory serves, who I recall seemed to be watching me somewhat speculatively over her G&T. I could easily have been imagining things, however, since those drinks were pretty powerful. As for the man himself, we discussed his obsessive belief in ECT, a practice I have strongly disapproved of for many years. He also spoke of the effect of ECT on the brain being similar to what happens to individuals who get 'psychic shocks' or whatever they're called from Voodoo practices. He claimed to have a lot of 16mm films of Voodoo ceremonies he took himself in, I assume, Haiti. It's possible I suppose that some of these Christian cults where pastors point at people and they appear to get knocked flat by the power of God are cut from the same cloth, although that's just my theory. But bollocks of course, either way. I never saw

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick J. Kearney, *The Private Case: An Annotated Bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum) Library* (London: Jay Landesman, 1981). A monumental work.

any of his films.

To sum up: Stock has written a valuable work that sheds a lot of light on some dark areas of British psychiatry and intelligence and points the way for further study. An essential work.

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