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February 2013
Vol 63 Issue 2

History *Today*

What happened then matters now

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Winston's Black Dog

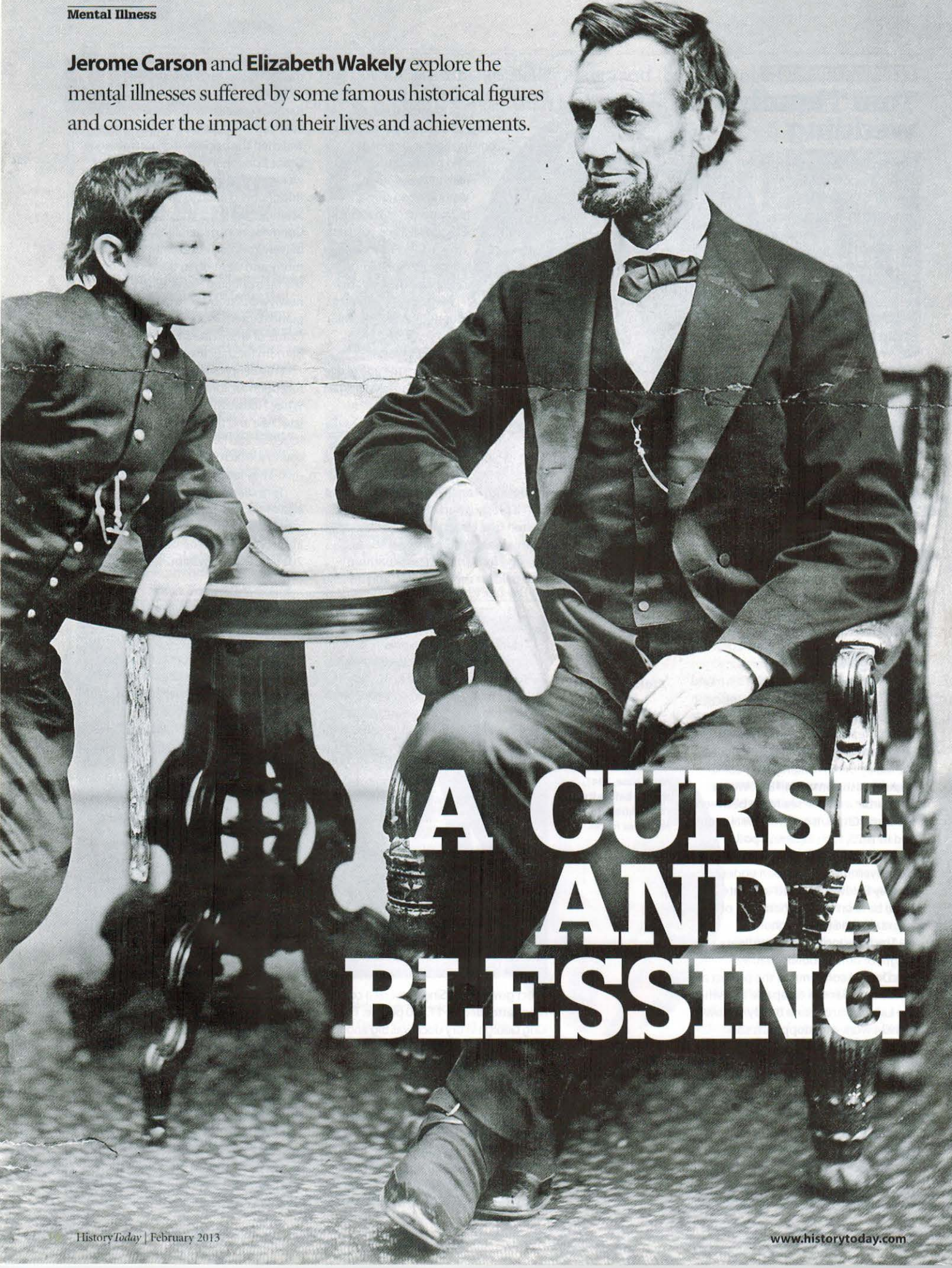
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FROM THE ARCHIVE
Hugh Bicheno on
Elizabethan
Pirates

Jerome Carson and **Elizabeth Wakely** explore the mental illnesses suffered by some famous historical figures and consider the impact on their lives and achievements.



A CURSE AND A BLESSING

Every schoolchild has, or should have, heard of Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln, but how many people know that they suffered from mental illness? In 2009 Tony Blair's former communications director, Alastair Campbell, and the writer Nigel Jones wrote a short paper for the Time to Change anti-stigma campaign entitled, 'A World Without: The Fantastic Five'. They argued that, if Churchill, Nightingale, Darwin, Lincoln and Marie Curie had been alive today, the stigma and discrimination that exists towards the mentally ill would have prevented them achieving what they did and that as a consequence the world would have been a different and a poorer place. But it may also be that, despite some hindrances and setbacks, the mental suffering experienced by Lincoln, Darwin, Nightingale and Churchill actually facilitated and contributed to many of their successes and achievements. Such a theory of a creative malady is well known in its application to those in the creative arts but less so for those in other disciplines and in public life. At the outset it is important to bear in mind the caveat expressed by the psychiatrist Anthony Storr: 'In a subject in which so much is controversial, it behoves the psychiatrist and the historian to be modest in their claims to psychological understanding.'

There is no doubt that our understanding of mental illness has advanced considerably in recent decades but, as psychiatrist Professor Norman Sartorius noted in 1999:

A hundred years is a moment in the history of mankind: for psychiatry the past century contains almost all of its history.

Three of the four famous figures described in this article lived mainly in the 19th century, before most of these advances in psychiatry. While to the best of our knowledge none of the four saw a psychiatrist, Churchill was the only one fully acquainted with psychiatry and, in a letter to a friend written in 1942, he had this to say about the profession:

I am sure it would be sensible to restrict as much as possible the work of these gentlemen, who are capable of doing an immense amount of harm with what may easily descend into charlatanism. The tightest hand should be kept over them and they should not be allowed to quarter themselves among Fighting Services at the public expense.

So what evidence is there that Lincoln, Darwin, Nightingale and Churchill were mentally ill?

Abraham Lincoln

Of the four historical 'heroes' considered here, Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) is unique in having had two books written solely about his mental health problems. This may reflect a greater concern with matters of the mind in North American culture. Whatever the reasons, Lincoln's mental health problems are well documented. Joshua Shenk tackles three

Photograph of Abraham Lincoln with his son Tad (Thomas), who died aged 18 in 1871.

issues in his book *Lincoln's Melancholy* (2006). First, he asks whether Lincoln had a depressive illness. Second, he looks at the treatment he received. Third, he considers how Lincoln's mental problems contributed to his life as a public figure. It was said of Lincoln by his law partner William Herndon that: 'His melancholy dripped from him as he walked'.

Lincoln had a family history of depression. He also experienced significant loss in his childhood. His only brother died when he was three. His mother died when he was nine. The one constant figure in his childhood was his sister Sarah, yet she died in childbirth when he was 19. Seven years later, following the death of his friend Anna Rutledge, Lincoln experienced his first serious depressive episode; further episodes had such a powerful effect on him because they reawakened memories of his early losses.

After a second episode of clinical depression Lincoln was treated by a Dr Henry. No medical record of his treatment exists, but accounts of contemporary medical interventions suggest that he would have been bled, purged and puked, starved, dosed with mercury and pepper, rubbed with mustard and plunged in cold water. Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-82), also suffered from depression and a mental disorder, possibly schizophrenia. Indeed her eldest son, Robert, had his mother committed to an asylum in 1875. Two of the couple's other three boys predeceased their father, which can't have helped matters and the youngest, Tad, died at the age of 18 in 1871. Yet, like Churchill, Lincoln seems to have developed remarkably effective coping strategies for dealing with depression. His first was by telling jokes and stories. Shenk writes that: 'By the time he was a teenager, grown men would flock around him, eager to hear his jokes and stories. He was well liked.'

Another strategy was to read, recite and compose poetry that focused on the themes of death, despair and human frailty. As he commented himself: 'I have hours of depression which must be unbent ... You know I am not a man of very hopeful temperament.'

Charles Darwin

Like Lincoln, Charles Darwin (1809-82) lost his mother when he was only eight years old. His father was seemingly a strict disciplinarian. He left home at 16 to study medicine in Edinburgh, but he preferred natural history. His father sent him to Cambridge, hoping he might be directed towards a career in the Church. Darwin himself had other ideas and he was more inspired by lectures on botany and natural history than theology. At the age of 22 he was nominated as a suitable person to be the scientific officer on the voyage of the *Beagle*. The onset of Darwin's health problems can be dated to just before the start of the voyage, as he himself recorded:

I was also troubled with palpitations about the heart ... and was convinced I had heart disease.

On his return to England, and following his marriage in 1839, Darwin suffered increasing bouts of illness with symptoms including headaches, palpitations,

From the Archive



Photographing Madness

Richard Lansdown introduces Hugh Welch Diamond, one of the fathers of medical photography, whose images of the insane both reflected and challenged prevailing ideas about visually recording insanity.

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shortness of breath, nausea and vomiting, as well as insomnia, fainting, crying and trembling. These interfered with daily life and his ability to work and he started to avoid scientific meetings and all social gatherings. He missed the launch of his magnum opus, *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859 and did not participate in the great Oxford debate of 1860 between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and the scientist T.H. Huxley. His chronic condition led him to miss his daughter's wedding and his father's funeral, as he was too unwell to attend. Perhaps even more surprisingly, having spent time in Malvern with his dying daughter Annie, he returned to his home in Down the day before her funeral, leaving his sister-in-law and the child's governess to supervise the burial.

Darwin consulted more than 20 doctors, including many specialists of the time. He tried numerous treatments, especially the then fashionable 'water cure' (hydropathy), and made several visits to spas, sometimes for a few months at a time. Numerous explanations have been offered for Darwin's mysterious illness, including Chagas' Disease (contracted from the bites of *Benchuga* bugs in the Andes), psychosomatic skin disorder and most recently systemic lactose intolerance. The balance of opinion seems to be that Darwin suffered for 40 years with a socially crippling anxiety disorder. Writing in *The Lancet* in 1943 Douglas Hubble commented:

Darwin by his psychoneurosis secretly and passionately nourished his genius; he was thus protected from painful and wasted contacts, escaped from any circumstances which interfered with his work and was rewarded by nights of sleepless suffering which stimulated his creative mind.

However there is another contributing factor to his malaise which should be mentioned: his marriage. As his depression and anxiety continued he became increasingly dependent on his wife, whose fundamentalist Christian beliefs he knew were incompatible with his life's work. This dichotomy may also help to explain his reluctance to make his theories public.

Florence Nightingale

As with Darwin, there has been considerable debate about the exact nature of the health problems suffered by Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Long before she went to the Crimea she experienced episodes of depression linked to her restricted Victorian childhood despite, or perhaps because of, the enlightened education her father gave her which led her to expect more. There were tensions with her mother and sister due to her parents' refusal to allow Florence to follow her vocation to become a nurse, as they felt it was a job unsuitable for a 'gentlewoman'. A number of diary entries record that she had 'no desire but to die'. While in the Crimea, she became ill on her 35th birthday and was diagnosed as having 'Crimean Fever'. She was very ill for a few weeks and her health continued to deteriorate on her return to England. In September 1857 she declared herself an invalid and began to limit the number of visitors she received and the frequency of

Florence Nightingale's sister, Parthenope, and mother, both of whom she refused to see at times.



their visits. In 1861 her spinal pain became so severe that she was unable to walk and had to be carried from her bed to the sofa. For the next six years she was largely confined to bed and rarely left her home for the next 30 years. The widely accepted view is that Nightingale contracted brucellosis in the Crimea from drinking contaminated goat's milk and that this condition became chronic. But this explanation is insufficient. For whatever reasons, she refused to see her mother and sister. She shunned the fame that her work in the Crimea had thrust upon her. She also suffered from feelings of guilt when she realised that the large death toll at Scutari was, in the main, due to her lack of knowledge about bad sanitation and its consequences. This, together with 'survivor guilt' and all that she had endured seems to have manifested itself in post-traumatic stress disorder. It is quite likely that she suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome as well. A bipolar personality disorder (manic depression) could also help to explain her swings between total inactivity and frenetic cerebral, if not physical, activity.

Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill (1874-1965) had his own name for his recurrent episodes of depression: Black Dog. His condition began in his lonely youth, with a strict and distant father and a remote but much-adored mother,

From the Archive

HT Priessnitz: Keep Taking the Liquids
Ian Bradley looks at the life of Vincent Priessnitz, pioneer of hydrotherapy, whose water cures gained advocates throughout 19th-century Europe and beyond and are still popular today.
www.historytoday.com/archive

Nightingale in 1906 by which time she spent most of her time in bed.



and was closely linked to life events, for example, his loss of office and prestige after the Dardanelles fiasco in 1915 and the wilderness years of the 1930s, when his depression was at its most severe. In a conversation with his personal physician, Lord Moran, during the war years, Churchill commented:

Black depression settled on me ... I didn't like standing near the edge of a platform when an express train was passing through ... I don't like to stand by the edge of a ship and look down into the water. A second's action would end everything.

Lord Moran in turn informed Churchill:

The Black Dog business you get from your forebears. You have fought against it all your life ... You always avoid anything that is depressing.

Rather like Lincoln, Churchill was also quite successful in battling his depressive episodes. His coping strategies included cerebral and artistic pursuits, such as writing and painting, and more physical ones, such as bricklaying, along with over-indulgence in food, alcohol and cigars.

While there is little disagreement that Churchill suffered from depression, there is more dispute over whether he may have had bipolar disorder. It was the psychiatrist Anthony Storr who drew attention to

manic features in Churchill's personality in *Churchill's Black Dog and Other Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1989). David Owen, in his 2008 book *In Sickness and In Power: Illness in Heads of Government in the Last 100 Years*, decided that the evidence is not conclusive, either way. However there is no doubt that Churchill's moods were highly labile. Echoing the observations of another close friend of Churchill, Lord Beaverbrook, General Ismay commented in a letter:

He is either on the crest of a wave, or in the trough; either highly laudatory, or bitterly condemnatory; either in an angelic temper, or a hell of a rage ... He is a child of nature with moods as variable as an April day.

A positive curse

From the evidence, then, it would appear that Abraham Lincoln suffered with recurrent depression, Charles Darwin had a chronic anxiety disorder, Florence Nightingale had both physical and mental health problems, Winston Churchill also had recurrent depressive episodes and may, in addition, have had bipolar disorder. But how did their respective mental health problems facilitate and even add to their achievements?

Campbell and Jones conclude that present-day attitudes towards mental illness are stigmatising. However, Joshua Shenk is of the view that Lincoln's depression did not harm his political prospects at the time, as it might today. One contemporary politician raised the issue of Lincoln's depression not to question his fitness for office, but to show how the president had triumphed over adversity. Shenk comments:

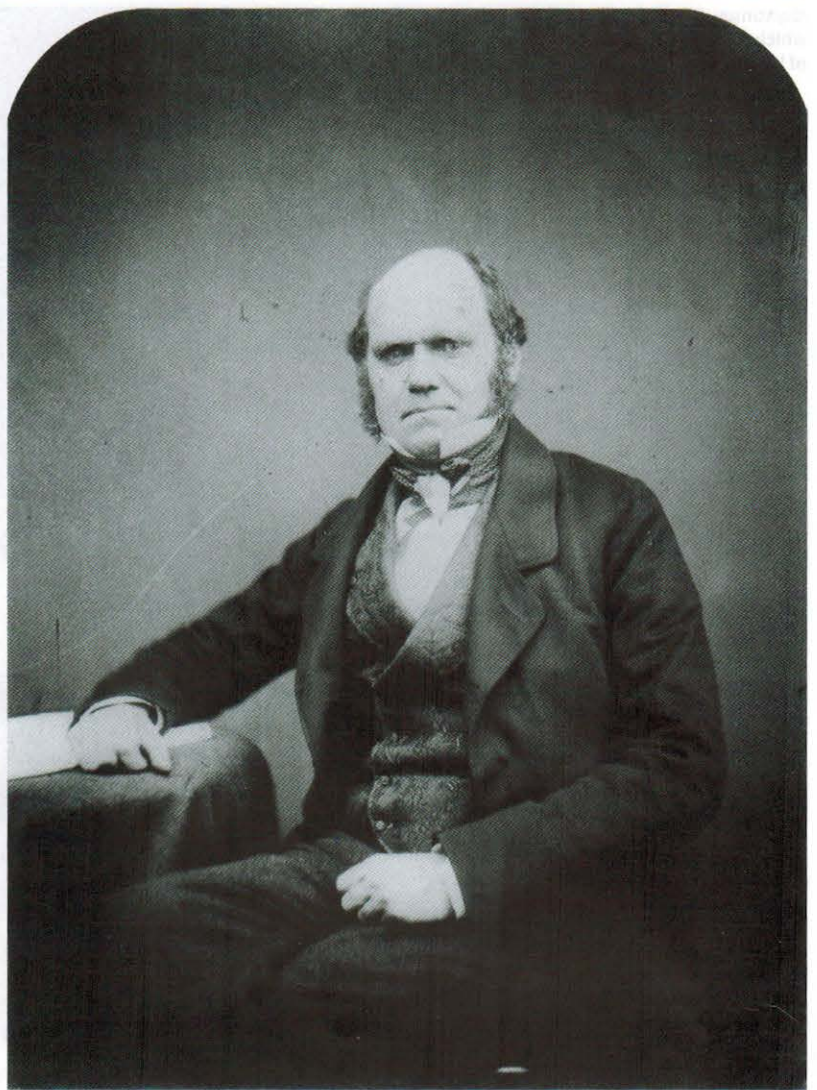
After a lifetime of inner turmoil, Lincoln had the experience and judgement to look trouble in the eye and that his ... tendency to depressive realism – a temperamental inclination to see and prepare for the worst, gave him an advantage.

Even his marital problems had their upside, teaching him how to deal with difficult people, as few were more awkward than Mary Todd Lincoln, and leading him to channel his emotional energy into his political career, which became increasingly ambitious.

While suicide is a constant temptation for people who suffer with recurrent depression, the longer Lincoln lived the more he became convinced that his life had meaning and a sense of purpose. He told his close friend Joshua Speed:

I am not afraid and would be more than willing to die. But I have an irrepressible desire to live till I can be assured that the world is a little better for my having lived in it.

There is no doubt that he achieved this aim through the abolition of slavery and by his determined and single-minded leadership during the American Civil War, a victory which preserved the union of the United States. One only has to read the Gettysburg Address to comprehend Lincoln's passionate beliefs.



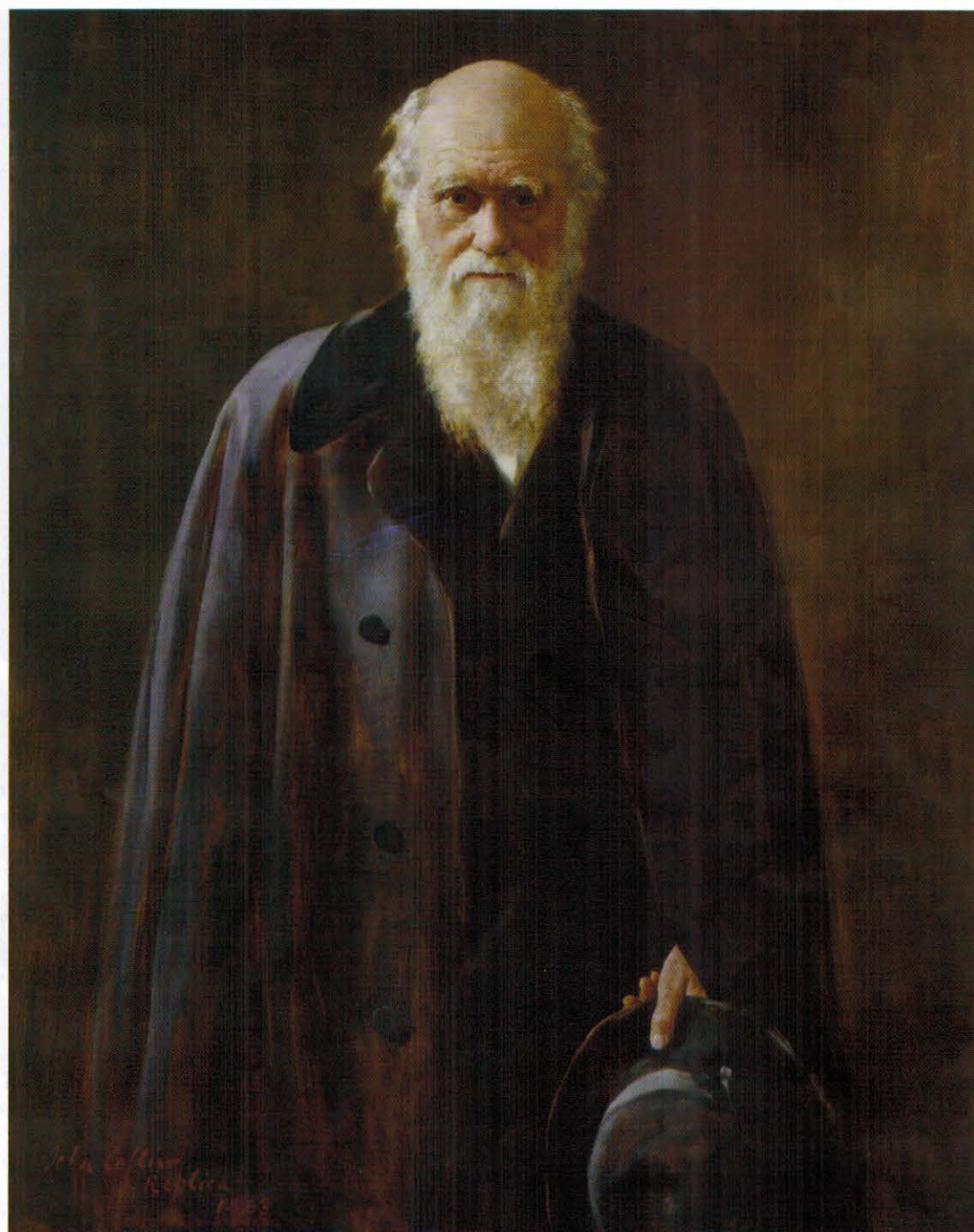
Charles Darwin
photographed c.1855.

Darwin's large and detailed output in the fields of natural history, geology and evolution is well-known, from his accounts of the *Beagle* voyage through many papers written in the 1840s and 1850s. But there were times during his 30 or so years of illness when he was unable to work for months. Indeed one of his physicians worked out a daily schedule that resulted in his seldom doing more than five hours of work a day. However, his illness was in itself creative as it enabled him to get on with his research and writing. He himself recognised this, writing in his autobiography:

My chief enjoyment and sole employment throughout life has been scientific work ... I have had ample leisure from not having to earn my own bread. Even ill health, though it has annihilated several years of my life, has saved me from the distractions of society and amusement.

Interestingly, after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 Darwin began to pick up, psychologically and physically. This lends credence to the view that at least some of his anxiety was caused by the internal tensions in the run up to publication generated by his relationship with his wife, who opposed its thesis on religious grounds.

Darwin painted by John Collier in 1881.



Shadow of the lamp

The severity of Florence Nightingale's illness was extreme. Yet despite this, in the years following her return from the Crimea, she produced over 200 reports, pamphlets and books devoted to the cause of the reform of public health. In one of her estimated 10,000 letters she wrote:

When I have work to do which must be finished by a certain time, I work sometimes 20 out of 24 hours.

Quite an achievement for a woman suffering from chronic debilitating illness. Her campaigning produced tangible results. In 1860 the Training School for Nurses was founded at St Thomas' Hospital, leading to the establishment of nursing schools else-

where and the recognition of nursing as a respectable and valued profession. Changes were made in army and civilian hospitals, with improved design, sanitation and medical training, as well as better provision for the care of the sick in workhouses infirmaries. Advances were brought about in midwifery and district nursing was set up, bringing local healthcare to rural districts, where preventative medicine was one of her great concerns. Not content with this, Nightingale also devoted 40 years to the improvement of public health in India. In her own eyes, all of this was far more important than anything she had done in the Crimea, on which her popular fame rests. Indeed, it is this later work that constitutes her legacy.

Nightingale was assisted by a number of men, such as Sidney Herbert, the secretary for war, with whom

she kept in touch mainly through correspondence and who served as advocates for her ideas in the wider political domain. Henry Bonham Carter MP was so outspoken on her behalf, that some referred to him as the Honourable Member for Florence Nightingale.

But for the Second World War, Winston Churchill might have been consigned to the 'dustbin' of history, remembered only as a minor and not very successful politician. However in this situation qualities that under normal circumstances were a liability became an asset. His ruthless determination, his stubbornness, his refusal to give in and his intransigence are all manifestly evident in his speeches, particularly those of May and June 1940. Throughout the war his intolerance and disdain towards those whose opinions differed from his own led to his overruling his advisers, both political and military, and he was able to get away with it. He rejoiced in belligerence and combativeness. Resentment of authority and difficulty in dealing with hostility or animosity often leads depressives to seek out opponents in the external world and Hitler was the man upon whom Churchill could release his aggression. He had, too, an unwavering belief in his own invincibility and his own destiny:

This cannot be accident, it must be design. I was kept for this job.

This is perhaps a bipolar blurring of the line between fantasy and reality. As Lord Moran said:

It was the inner world of make-believe in which Winston found reality.

When Churchill told Lady Violet Bonham Carter, 'We are all worms. But I do believe that I am a glow-worm', he encapsulated self-abasement and self-glorification in a single phrase.

Seemingly never given to introspection, it may also be that Churchill's own experience of depression enabled him to understand and sympathise with the deprivation and hardships the people suffered during the war years. His radio broadcasts to the nation certainly appear, on the whole, to have given hope and the will to endure. However Anthony Storr is convinced that it was manic aspects of Churchill's mental illness that were critical to his success:

Had Churchill been a stable and equable man, he could never have inspired the nation. In 1940, when all the odds were against Britain, a leader of sober judgement might well have concluded we were finished.

Positive role models

Because knowledge of mental illness was not as advanced or widespread in the 19th century as it is today, attitudes towards it were less stigmatising, as was the case with Lincoln's depression. It may be that, if these four famous people had been alive today and their conditions widely known about, negative attitudes towards their mental health problems would have impeded their progress. However the notion of a creative malady is also relevant. Isolated from their



Winston Churchill building a wall at his Chartwell home in 1928 during his wilderness years.

social world and obligations, Darwin and Nightingale were able to devote their creative energies to their reading, research and writing. Having experienced repeated episodes of depression, Lincoln and Churchill were both prepared for the challenges and disappointments of war and used their distinctive personality traits to their, and others', advantage.

Yet perhaps the most important result of the study of mental illness in historical heroes is that it provides positive images for those experiencing mental health problems today. That each of these great historical figures experienced mental illness yet still made major contributions to the world should help reduce the stigma that mental illness evokes and provide hope to current sufferers and their families. While it is all too easy to make grandiose claims for the influence of particular individuals on the course of history, it might not be too fanciful here to parody the words of one of our historical heroes: 'Never in the field of human suffering, has so much hope been offered by so few to so many.'

Jerome Carson is Professor of Psychology at The University of Bolton and **Elizabeth Wakely** is a former history teacher. They are co-editors, with Sophie Davies and Sarah Morgan, of *Mental Health Recovery: Heroes Past and Present* (Pavilion, 2011).

Further Reading

Anthony Storr, *Churchill's Black Dog and Other Phenomena of the Human Mind* (Harper Collins, 1989).

Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale* (Penguin, 2008).

Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (Joseph, 1991).

Joshua Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fuelled his Greatness* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).



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