

# ALEC JENNER, 1927–2014 – appreciations

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By Helen Spandle

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Frederick Alec Jenner was a psychiatrist and co-founder of *Asylum: The Magazine for Democratic Psychiatry*. Alec started out as a bio-chemical research psychiatrist and instigated the first trials of drugs like Valium; yet he was also open to anti-psychiatry, social psychiatry and psychotherapies. He was very supportive of the emerging patients/service users movement – well before this was fashionable. For example, he was involved in the service-user run project, McMurphy's, in Sheffield in the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately he was a powerful advocate for a more humane and democratic psychiatry. He was never afraid to hold his hands up and admit his mistakes – one of his rare gifts. I think it was Alec's own doubts about his practice, and the mistakes the medical profession made with the over-prescribing of benzodiazepines, that made Alec ready to question current orthodoxy, and listen to dissenting views. He knew only too well that psychiatry's next big mistake might be right around the corner.

Inspired by critical developments of the time, and especially the Italian democratic psychiatry movement, Alec co-founded *Asylum* magazine in 1986, with Phil Virden and Lynn Bigwood. I met Alec in 1992 when I went to Sheffield University to study a course he helped set up with Tim Kendall: an innovative Masters degree in Psychiatry, Philosophy and Society. Alec had seen an undergraduate essay I wrote about the German Socialist Patients Collective (SPK), which was later published in the magazine, and he helped get the university to waive my course fees.

When I arrived, Alec had just retired, but was still a key presence in the Department, doing the occasional lecture and regularly attending the popular Tuesday evening discussion forums that he established. He was still heavily involved in *Asylum* magazine, and had regular editorial collective meetings at his farmhouse. In those days, members of the collective usually went home clutching half a dozen eggs or a jar of honey. It felt quite *laissez faire*, but ultimately a pretty democratic arrangement. Alec and other members of the collective regularly invited people along to meetings, including current and former patients, who often

visited him and even stayed at his house. Whoever turned up for meetings would be part of decision-making, and effectively part of the collective. Many people came and went, but for many years Alec held the magazine together, using his home as its base.

Alec knew how complex madness and psychiatry were, and what enormous ethical issues they raise for society. He wasn't going to simplify it for the sake of his career, or to make a big name for himself. He had no axe to grind and no line to push. He was never one for grandstanding, for making claims in the name of 'radicalism' – a tendency that often besets the mental health field. He was not guilty of what Peter Sedgwick called 'psychopolitics' (the tendency to use madness to justify a particular radical ideology at the expense of the needs of the people affected). In this sense he espoused a *real politik* – a politics defined by pragmatism, not ideology. Neither was he prepared to abdicate responsibility for trying to relieve the suffering of others (even if his efforts were, by his own admission, sometimes naive, clumsy or ill-advised). He knew he was socially privileged – by virtue of his class, status and education – and he wanted to use this position for the benefit of others. This might sound crass, but how many people can truly claim this?

Neither was he afraid to raise awkward questions. For example, he wrote an unpopular article in the pages of *Asylum* defending ECT (in very exceptional circumstances). No decent human being likes the idea of electric shocks through the brain. It offends our sensibilities. However, I know people who swear their lives were saved by ECT when nothing else worked. What do we do about such claims? Do we say they are deluded, or suffering from false consciousness? Alec didn't seek controversy, and he wasn't in favour of ECT, but he did want to have a genuine debate about the issue – a debate which is still long overdue. Perhaps Alec's political libertarianism didn't always lead to wise choices, for example when considering an article defending paedophilia, or deciding to publish an article by the False Memory Society. Then again, if you didn't turn up to a collective meeting, you didn't get a say. This revealed

how naive and traditional Alec could be at times. He freely admitted that he found some of the more recent critiques of gender and sexuality hard to stomach, or even understand. I vividly remember him giving me a poor grade for a paper I wrote about trans-sexuality. Yet although I don't think he really 'got' the gender politics of it all, a lot of his feedback was spot on.

Most of all, Alec was open minded, and always prepared to try and understand different views and perspectives. He tried to reflect and understand the world as he encountered it – in all its contradictions – through his research and practice. In that sense he was an empiricist, a scientist, in the best sense of the world. Unfortunately, both of these are often dirty words nowadays. He didn't just surround himself with people he agreed with, who would buttress his own view of the world. He purposefully tried to create a space for alternative and marginalized views, whether he agreed with them or not.

Both myself and Terence McLaughlin (editor of *Asylum* magazine from 2000 to 2007) tried to convince Alec to write an autobiography, or let us write his biography. In typical modesty he declined. Yet he remained ever generous in recounting his experiences to the many people over the years who sought his advice, and lending out his books from his vast library – many of which I'm sure he never got back! A biography would have made for fascinating reading, as

he was closely involved in some of the best and the worst aspects of modern psychiatry, as well as resistance to it. He sat on both sides, and was never overly defensive or unnecessarily attacking of either. Indeed, he rarely saw them as opposing sides. Whilst people could be hyper-critical of Alec – he was either not radical enough, or too radical for some – he seemed to take criticism in good heart, and his door remained open. If we need psychiatrists (and that's another debate that still needs to be had), then I believe Alec was the kind of consultant you'd want to see – he genuinely saw his role as being someone people could 'consult', rather than a medical expert.

I admired and respected Alec enormously. I experienced him as warm, kind and generous with his time. He had a calm humility that continues to inspire me and drive my vision for *Asylum* magazine – to truly offer a space where contentious ideas can be aired and discussed openly and honestly, without pre-judgement or dogma. *Asylum* is still going strong, and is now published and distributed by PCCS Books.

**A version of this, and other reflections about Alec, can be found at the *Asylum* magazine website <http://www.asylumonline.net/alec/>**

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# A Dialogue Arising from the Book *Deconstructing Psychopathology*<sup>1</sup>

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**Alec Jenner (AJ) and Richard House (RH)**

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## Introduction

In the autumn of 1996, S&S co-editor Richard House entered into an email dialogue with psychiatrist Alec Jenner about the book *Deconstructing Psychopathology* (Sage, 1995). Never published before in its entirety, with Alec's passing we thought it a fitting tribute to Professor Jenner to republish this dialogue here – not least because

the issue of the arguably inappropriate medicalization of human experience just doesn't go away.

Some context is necessary. I (RH) had written a very favourable review article on *Deconstructing Psychopathology* for *Asylum* magazine,<sup>2</sup> and Alec wanted to take issue with some of my arguments; and the results of the ensuing dialogue are reproduced below. We have