



Needles, picks and an intern named Laing: exploring the psychiatric spaces of Army life

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Abstract

This paper delves into the world of medical and Army psychiatric practice in Britain during the 1950s, in order to reveal the importance of thinking geographically about the life and work of Scottish psychiatrist and psychotherapist Ronald David Laing (1927–1989). The paper first discusses the previous biographical literature produced on Laing and his own autobiography, arguing that by viewing Laing's life and work through a geographical lens certain underexplored spaces, sites and places emerge. The following sections will detail Laing's time spent as an intern in the West of Scotland Neurological Unit at Killearn, where he first endured the harsh working realities of medical practice and where critical debates in 1950s mental health care were playing out in a microcosm. These included the controversial treatment of lobotomy and the brewing tensions between neurology and psychiatry. As Laing's career took a military turn and he was posted to work within the insulin coma unit of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital in Netley, it is possible to highlight the development of Laing's thoughts on the treatment of psychiatric patients in the hands of the Army, and how he attempted to come to terms with these practices in his own unique way. Using the experimental practice of insulin coma therapy as an example, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the space of treatment itself was active in shaping Laing's future engagements with his psychiatric patients.

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Keywords: R.D. Laing; Biography; Autobiography; Geographies of science; Military psychiatry; Hospitals

Scottish-born psychiatrist and psychotherapist Ronald David Laing (1927–1989), became globally renowned for his controversial, yet inspiring, views on mental ill-health. Studying medicine at Glasgow University between 1945 and 1951, then training in psychiatry at various institutions around Britain in the 1950s, Laing was keen to investigate the intimate connections between the mind and body in the everyday lives of his patients.¹ He became particularly well-known for his advocacy of humane treatment for those individuals experiencing severe forms of mental ill-health, and through an existential-phenomenological approach – as shown in his early writings of *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others* – his broader philosophy on mental health care situated the patient and their lifeworlds at the centre of attention.² Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Laing's controversial opinions on the treatment of individuals experiencing mental ill-health and his outspokenness about the establishment of mental health care – coinciding with the development of the anti-psychiatry movement – led him to

become renowned in the British popular media as a 'guru' who somehow made sense of madness.³ However, the fame that followed in the wake of this elevation to counterculture hero could not be sustained, and soon after he was left to 'fall like a stone to personal dissolution and to professional oblivion', perhaps explaining his notable absence from many academic disciplines, including human geography, to-date.⁴ Many scholars have focussed intently on this period of 'fame', however, it is back to the very beginnings and makings of Laing's most critically acclaimed works that this paper turns, in order to convey the importance of thinking geographically about the life and work of such a significant, yet neglected, figure.

This paper seeks to contribute not only to the many ongoing creative attempts to chart individual lives through a geographical lens, but also to the task of 'illuminating the geographies of scientific knowledge' through the examination of Laing's movements between and through different medical and psychiatric spaces and

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¹ Importantly, Laing also trained in psychoanalysis at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London during the early 1960s.

² R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, London, 1960; R.D. Laing, *Self and Others*, London, 1961.

³ K. Carmichael, R.D. Laing, the guru who made sense of madness, *The Herald* (1985). Papers of Ronald David Laing, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections (hereafter PRDL): MS Laing T13.

⁴ A. Clare, in: B. Mullan (Ed.), *R.D. Laing: Creative Destroyer*, London, 1997, 1.

places during his time in medical internship and national service.⁵ David Livingstone's work has effectively demonstrated that science is the product of numerous interconnecting histories and geographies attached to different sites of its activities, their associated regional settings and tied together through the processes in which knowledge circulates.⁶ Livingstone has paved the way for many (historical) geographers to think carefully about the spatiality of scientific knowledge and practice allowing, for example, the exploration of specific kinds of spaces made for the conduct of scientific inquiry, the architecture of science, and recently the spaces of speech (and silence), all of which have proved invaluable in opening up questions about the ways in which space and place shape science.⁷ However, Livingstone's arguments in this vein are not universally accepted and indeed are contested by certain historians of science as, for some, his formulations tend to credit to space the effects that others may credit to the people in that space, or the cultural, social, economic and political relationships that intersect there.⁸ Charles Withers, in his piece charting the connections between place, space, and the idea of the local as evident in recent work in history and geography, explores such issues in finer detail in reference to the history and geography of science.⁹ For Withers, paying renewed attention to place *and* to the connections between places is crucial in pushing the geographical sensibility to science further, as '[t]he fact that the nature of science is conditioned by place, is *produced through place* as practice rather than simply *in place* is of greater significance'.¹⁰

This work aims to follow Livingstone and Withers' call to be more attentive to place, and also to the connections between places, by using the biographical subject of Laing to uncover some of the initial encounters and situated experiences that influenced Laing's understanding of psychiatric patients and their individual worlds. Firstly, this paper will briefly discuss the previous biographical literature produced on Laing and his own autobiography, and from this will argue that by viewing Laing's life and work through a geographical lens certain underexplored spaces, sites and places emerge that move biographical discussions into new terrains. By charting Laing's time spent as an intern in medical training and Army psychiatric practice, from early 1951 to the winter of 1953, it becomes possible to find interconnections between the people and situations experienced *within* these particular spaces and his later theories and practices on the subject of mental ill-health. The following sections of this paper detail Laing's time spent in the West of Scotland Neurological Unit at Killearn, where he first endured the harsh working realities of medical practice and where critical debates in 1950s mental health care were being played out in a microcosm. As Laing's future takes

a military turn and he is posted to work within the insulin coma ward of the Royal Victoria Military Hospital's P Block, it becomes possible to highlight the development of Laing's thoughts on the treatment of psychiatric patients in the hands of the Army, and how he attempted to come to terms with these practices in his own unique way. Using the experimental practice of insulin coma therapy as an example, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the space of treatment itself was active in shaping Laing's engagements with his psychiatric patients. In opening up, and being attentive to, these differing spaces and places, and Laing's movement between them, it becomes evident that not only was Laing learning to engage with particular situated scientific knowledge, but it was also here that he began to resist against them, which led his life to turn in directions that as a young intern he never could have envisioned.

The many lives of R.D. Laing

Charlatan, womanizer, maverick, self publicist, captivator, drunk, humanist, are simply a few of the words that have been used by biographers to describe R.D. Laing since his death in 1989. He has been declared a 'divided self', a 'guru', a chauvinist, an acid Marxist and alongside Michel Foucault, Thomas Szasz and Erving Goffman, one of the four horsemen of the anti-psychiatric apocalypse.¹¹ Each of these definitions has been contested. Kay Carmichael argues that, 'anyone who tries to categorise this man is in difficulties', and this is due in part to the multiple nature of the lives he lived.¹² When first looking through the several published biographies that exist, it is curious to note how little attention is paid to the actual work that earned him the reputation of being possibly one of Scotland's most important public intellectuals of the twentieth century.¹³ Bob Mullan argues that, if Laing had only written *The Divided Self*, his place in the twenty-first century would be assured, but instead the controversial nature of many of his personal encounters and his various difficult character traits are what have found popularity in the printing press, thereby bringing him into public consciousness.¹⁴

Many of the early biographies, such as John Clay's, chart the rise and fall of Laing through his personal life journey from a lower middle-class upbringing in Glasgow through to international notoriety to the decline in popularity, health and mental stability that followed.¹⁵ However, recently, biographical studies of Laing have become more varied in focus. There exists an account of a father from his second eldest son Adrian, a volume of stories about 'Ronnie' from his friends, patients, colleagues and lovers, a search to uncover the 'mystery' of Laing through examining his life and work in conjunction, an attempt to situate Laing's ideas in

⁵ For an example of such literature, see H. Lorimer, Telling small stories: spaces of knowledge and the practice of geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (2003) 197–217; H. Lorimer, Herding memories of humans and animals, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006) 497–518; M. Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800*, Cambridge, 2008; N. Thomas, Exploring the boundaries of biography: the family and friendship networks of Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1898–1905, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004) 449–458; D.N. Livingstone, Landscapes of knowledge, in: P. Meusbürger, D.N. Livingstone, H. Jons (Eds), *Geographies of Science*, Heidelberg, 2010.

⁶ D.N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, 2003.

⁷ For example, see D. Outram, New spaces in natural history, in: N. Jardine, J. Secord, E. Spary (Eds), *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge, 1996; S. Schaffer, Physics laboratories and the Victorian country house, in: J. Agar, C. Smith (Eds), *Making Space for Science*, London; P. Galison and E. Thomson (Eds), *The Architecture of Science*, Cambridge, 1999; T.F. Gieryn, Three truth-spots, *Journal of the Behavioral Sciences* 38 (2002) 113–132; D.N. Livingstone, Science, site and speech: scientific knowledge and the spaces of rhetoric, *History of the Human Sciences* 20 (2007) 71–98; S. Naylor, Introduction: historical geographies of science – places, contexts, cartographies, *British Journal for the History of Science* 38 (2005) 1–12.

⁸ For example, see R.C. Olby, *Companion to the History of Modern Science*, London, 1996.

⁹ C.W.J. Withers, Place and the 'spatial turn' in geography and in history, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70 (2009) 637–665.

¹⁰ Withers, Place and the 'spatial turn' in geography and in history (note 9), 653: emphasis in original.

¹¹ J. Clay, *R.D. Laing: A Divided Self*, London, 1996; Carmichael, R.D. Laing (note 3); E. Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*, London, 1987; B. Mullan, *R.D. Laing: Creative Destroyer*, London, 1997; A. Clare, Four horsemen of the apocalypse, *New Society* (1982). PRDL: MS Laing T196.

¹² Carmichael, R.D. Laing (note 3).

¹³ G. Miller, *R.D. Laing*, Edinburgh, 2004.

¹⁴ Mullan, *R.D. Laing* (note 11).

¹⁵ Clay, *R.D. Laing* (note 11).

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