

# Sigmund Freud: His Life and Work

ONE hundred years ago, on May 6, 1856, the founder of psycho-analysis, Sigmund Freud, was born. We print here excerpts from six talks on his life and work by DR. HAROLD BOURNE, Lecturer in Psychiatry in the University of Otago. The talks were first broadcast by 4YC, are now being heard from 2YC (on Thursdays), and will start from 1YC and 3YC during June.

FREUD'S achievement can be put simply. It was to discover, to explore, and to open up single-handed a new continent in the human mind, the territory of the Unconscious—to alter man's knowledge of his mind just as drastically as Columbus altered the map of the world. This must be imperishable, even though, as science advances, his pioneering charts, like those of all early settlers, inevitably are replaced by detailed surveys of those who follow later. . .

Looking back, he could remember no youthful craving to succour the sick. With this cynical piece of modesty Freud concealed, as was his habit, a good deal about himself, and in particular, strangely enough, his capacity for love and steady concern. He goes so far . . . as to say that he lacked completely, in his own words, "any genuine medical temperament." The reader would scarcely gather from this work [his autobiography] that he was a first-rate physician in the ordinary sense—being in certain diseases of children the leading authority of his day—long before fame was to overtake him as a psychologist. . . In fact, Freud was a good all-rounder as men of genius, contrary to popular belief, usually are. . .

Freud's first five years as a doctor, until in 1866 he went into consulting practice and married, were eventful and crowded. He was tempestuously in love and writing long love letters every day; he was still engaged on laboratory research in brain anatomy and publishing its results; he even dabbled with matters . . . which were well outside his province; he was busy gaining clinical research and reputation and finding interesting cases for the medical journals; he carried on a feud of his own on behalf of underfed patients; he schemed to gain a travelling scholarship; and he introduced cocaine into medicine. . .

It was never his good fortune, Freud once complained, to bring to light anything really new. The poets knew all the secrets of the Oedipus complex, any nursery maid was familiar with infantile sexuality, and while he himself was a medical student Joseph Breuer had discovered the Unconscious. In this Freud was being modest rather than truthful. . . At least some of the credit might have been given to Anna O., Breuer's patient, with whom it all began about 1880. Anna O. was an intelligent young woman afflicted with a perplexing variety of paralyses, coughs, hallucinations and many other disorders. She and Breuer discovered that these symptoms could be dispersed in the most peculiar way. If she could conjure up in her mind just how they began they would vanish. Anna O. aptly nicknamed this process the "talking cure," or "chimney sweeping." Breuer himself regarded it as a kind of mental purging and, translating that into Greek, called it catharsis. Breuer was entranced and for months spent an hour or more every day with this bizarre patient. He talked

about her to distraction and succeeded in making his wife mildly bored and then wearily jealous. Soon he found that with hypnotism Anna O.'s buried memories could be unearthed much more easily. . .

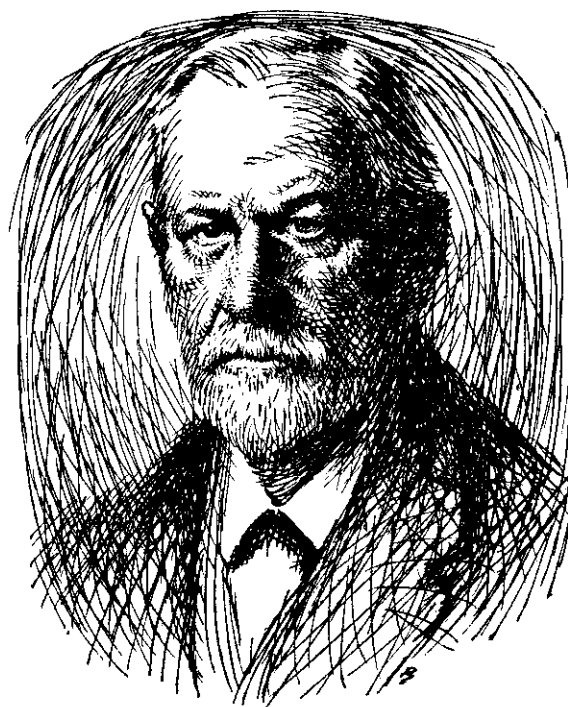
Anna O.'s case was the first of many which later on led Breuer and Freud to their much-quoted dictum "hysterics suffer from memories." The real significance of this disclosure which Freud soon came to appreciate, was its indication that an illness may be due to an idea or a guilty feeling, a notion foreign enough in that hey-day of the microscope; and that such an idea or guilty feeling could exist without the subject's being aware of it was something even more novel. . .

To supplement what hypnotism could not uncover, Freud began to question his patients in great detail about their lives, about their emotions, and, as their covert influence began to dawn on him, about their sexual experiences and their childhood. It was in this way as hypnotism was slowly abandoned that Freud brought into being a technique for investigating the mind that was entirely revolutionary and foolishly simple. Essentially he discovered it by being the first person to step off the medical pedestal and listen, and he was prepared to listen to anything and to observe everything, no matter what. . . What was new was that he listened as a scientist anxious to miss nothing and ceaselessly searching how the details might fit together, and he listened hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year, as no one had ever listened before. Shortly, it became evident that not only were psychological ailments a monument to the past, as

Anna O.'s seemed to be, but also they reflected unsuspected impulses very much in the present. . .

By 1900 the discovery of the Unconscious was complete, and it was given to the world in one of the most influential books of our time, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. By that time Freud, now 44, had completed his heroic psycho-analysis of himself, he was still solitary, but firm, independent and confident now in his maturity. He knew this

★ "He always answered if they wrote to him with any sincerity." ★



monumental work would be received with a few derisive reviews and then forgotten. That would be disappointing but not unbearable. After all, there was still work to be done, ideas to pursue. And who could guess the obscurity would lift? Who could predict that a book which in two years sold a bare 200 copies would soon become a classic? Its author, least of all, imagined the fame which awaited him in the new century. . .

"Geniuses are unbearable people," wrote Freud to a friend who tried to call him one. "You have only to ask my family to learn how easy I am to live with, so I certainly cannot be a genius." But in his equable routines, he did display one hallmark of genius, one which his family assuredly would not have denied, a phenomenal rate of work. Freud's working day, in fact, seems to have amazed every witness of it. People acquainted with the concentration and strain involved find seven or eight hours of psycho-analysis a day more than enough—even for an industrious person doing nothing else. In this

light Freud's performance was just astounding. . . His first patient came at eight in the morning and, save for two hours at lunch, he went on until the last patient departed at nine at night. It was not until his seventies that he would ever stop, even for a quick coffee, between three o'clock in the afternoon and nine at night.

And after that there was no rest—just a walk and a breath of fresh air with his wife or one of the children, and then he would retire to his study for several hours of reading and writing late into the night. Freud's output was far greater than his published works, and they alone exceed two dozen volumes. In the last half of his life he maintained an extensive and worldwide correspondence with friends, admirers, critics, disciples, patients, scholars, authors and even unknown persons whom he always answered if they wrote to him with any sincerity. Thousands of these letters have been preserved, all written in his own hand, and much of them complex and closely reasoned, with technical advice, criticism, discussion of difficulties and accounts of germinating ideas and opinions. . . The family would tell puzzled friends who inquired that they too couldn't understand how on earth he managed it all. "He just goes to his study and after an hour brings us 10 letters to be posted." . .

May I lapse into a personal note before I finish? The ponderous issue of just how exact a scientist Freud was only stirs me a little; I am not overwhelmed if his theories enable the psychology laboratory to produce at will animals who are tense, peaceful, warlike, miserly or wretchedly neurotic. What moves me is the obscure figure of the 1890's who forsook the medical pedestal to make sense of ordinary people's fears and emotions by humble listening and analysis. I think of Freud, next, alone, and unsupported, labouring, suffering, at war with his own preconceptions and exploring the darkest depths of the mind, convinced of no reward, doubtful of any recognition, even after his death. Then I see him as the pathetic father of six children watching his income dwindle and knowing that his masterpiece was sneered at and forgotten, and who yet was undaunted and ever pushed forward.

*If you make up your mind he should have analysed with me - I don't expect you will, he had to come over to Vienna. I have no intention of leaving home. However don't neglect to give me your answer. Sincerely yours with kind wishes Freud*

*O.S. I did not find it difficult to read your handwriting. Hope you will not find my writing and my English a herculean task.*