IN MEMORIAM

DAME GEORGIANA BULLER, R.R.C., D.B.E.
1884-1953

With the passing of Dame Georgiana the cause of rehabilitation has, throughout the world, lost a champion of dynamic personality and insuperable courage. Her character was of great complexity with its mixture of single-minded determination, brilliant intellect and simple kindness. Her youth was grounded in the social circle of a county family and the atmosphere of military discipline, nobility and integrity given by her ancestry. Her own life became a grand essay in rehabilitation.

She was the only child of General Sir Redvers Buller, V.C., G.C.B., G.C.M.G., whose fame as a soldier in South Africa was equalled by the affection with which he was held by those who fought with him and by their families in Devon. Her mother was Lady Audrey Buller, the youngest daughter of Rear-Admiral the fourth Marquess Townshend. Georgiana Buller was greatly influenced by her father, for whom in youth she acted as companion and secretary. The impressions of these years greatly affected her future interests. Before the Great War of 1914-18 she became prominent in the county organisation in Devon of the British Red Cross Society and at the same time developed her interest in people and in the countryside, where she was a first-class rider to foxhounds. In 1914 she seriously injured her spine in a hunting accident and before fully convalescent she insisted on getting up and proceeding to establish, soon after the outbreak of war, the Exeter V.A.D. Hospital. In 1916,
in the reorganisation of War Hospitals which proved necessary, that hospital, which had grown to 1,500 beds, was taken over by the War Office and soon had forty-eight auxiliary hospitals affiliated to it. As reported in The Times, "The whole complex organisation was administered with remarkable efficiency by Miss Buller until demobilisation in 1920 and she was the only woman to hold such a post in that war."

Since then we have become more familiar with the idea of women in high administrative positions. At that time, however, Dame Georgiana was a pioneer not by any feminist agitation but by sheer ability—an ability which was backed by complete self-confidence. It was perhaps not unnatural that she aroused the fiercest antagonisms from lesser minds, and from people hidebound by orthodox military procedure, and from those whose interests were not strictly related to the country's need of succouring the maimed and returning the recoverable to fitness in the shortest possible time. Her approach to the hospital problems of that war was original and with a strong personality she got her way against prejudiced obstruction. Her co-workers and juniors found her easy to work with because she was definite, knew what she wanted and was unusually fair and reasonable. She set a high standard and expected the same of others. The incompetent fared badly. She was a master of procedure and knew Army Council Instructions minutely. With dialectic and forensic ability she used all means to complete her purpose. Her greatness was recognised in 1920 when she received the Royal Red Cross and was created D.B.E.

The experiences of 1914 to 1920 exhausted her physically and psychologically. Her old spinal injury became troublesome and, not unlike Florence Nightingale, she collapsed and became herself a semi-invalid. From a state of lethargy she was aroused a year or two later by her farseeing medical advisor, the late Dr Henry Andrew, aided and abetted by one of her former surgical colleagues in the War Hospital, the late Brennan Dyball, F.R.C.S., who himself was one of the general surgical pioneers of orthopaedics in the South-West of England. In the partnership that followed Dame Georgiana truly rehabilitated herself. In a campaign in which they had assistance and encouragement from Robert Jones and Rowley Bristow money was raised for what was expected to be a "white elephant." Those who thought they knew said, of course, that there were no cripples in beautiful Devon. Eventually in 1927 the Princess Elizabeth Orthopaedic Hospital at Exeter was opened by the Duke and Duchess of York (as they then were) and named after the young Princess who now is our Queen.

It is interesting to look back at the first report of the Hospital's work which Dame Georgiana wrote. "Although it was not a pioneer, it can claim," she said, "the distinction of representing the only attempt yet made to co-ordinate within the framework of a single comprehensive organisation every form of activity bearing on the cripples' welfare." She did not then use the word rehabilitation but she recognised that medical and surgical treatment was not enough and that there must also be a welfare service and vocational training with it.

During these years it was natural that Dame Georgiana should play a prominent part in the work of the Central Council for the Care of Cripples and she was for some time vice-chairman of its executive committee. Believing that the medical and surgical aspects of rehabilitation were becoming adequately developed largely through legislative action she devoted her mind more and more to the problems of training and resettlement. In 1935 she gave up her more active interest in orthopaedics and established the two colleges for training and rehabilitation at Leatherhead (the Queen Elizabeth College) and at Exeter (St Loyes College). Established as regional centres, both became national in their scope and, though administered by voluntary bodies, carried out this work with the closest co-operation of the Ministry of Labour. This perhaps was not unconnected with the friendly help of the late Ernest Bevin who remembered that in his youth he had gathered apples from her father's orchards.

In the last fifteen years of her life, while maintaining her great interest in the national problems of rehabilitation (she was largely instrumental in establishing the British Council
for Rehabilitation), Dame Georgiana’s particular daily concern was the College at Exeter—and she carried to a large extent its administrative responsibility. In this she showed both her strength and weakness: the latter in that she took charge of matters which should have been left to efficient chiefs. Her strength expressed itself overwhelmingly in two ways. Firstly her ability to control official bodies and individuals by her almost hypnotic power of persuasion and the clarity of her logic. Secondly by her deep humanity. She had an uncanny gift for understanding the thoughts and feelings of the lowliest of trainees, and to speak in the simple language each could understand. If they failed to make the grade it was not through lack of encouragement and practical sympathy from her. She was able to get beyond the façade of reserve and inferiority. One dominant idea was found in all her work: it was “completeness.” She did not ask that her trainees should be brought to a stage where they could work only with charitable help or subsidy. The ideal to be pursued was complete independence: training for work which the community wanted for the work’s sake, and was prepared properly to reward, without any tag of commiseration. She never permitted anyone to believe that the individual was not capable of achieving this physical rehabilitation and the spiritual completion which it made possible.

A few remarks should be given upon a scheme which she instituted in 1947 for “preparatory training.” She recognised the special needs of young men and women compelled by disease to spend many months in long-stay hospitals—for instance, sanatoria as well as orthopaedic hospitals. Occupational therapy, though pleasant enough as a diversion, often lacked contact with the patient’s previous experience and future needs. Her scheme was to arrange courses of study for those who were capable of it, so that subjects from Arabic, book-keeping and chemistry to zoology could be taken and thus engage profitably the months as they passed. The first of these preparatory training schemes was established at Exeter: it covered the whole South-Western region and even beyond. The cause of the spastic child was another particular interest; by her faith she had proved against all advice what many could do at her colleges. She was impressed by the physical and educational neglect which so many of them showed on arriving for training. Her inspiration was in no small way responsible for the establishment in 1948, by the Dame Hannah Rogers Trust, of their School at Ivybridge.

Whatever Dame Georgiana put her hand to, she did superlatively well. She was a Justice of the Peace and she had a keen interest in music, drama and the arts. As recently as 1936 she acted in a charity performance and she did it with complete mastery and great humour—strangely enough it was as a witch. She was keen on gardens and had a great love of children. Her relatives saw this side of her at its best: she was charming with them. Equally was she with hospital children. Her rather stern face would light up with an unexpected happiness and interest. She forgot herself by getting into the lives and understanding of each.

Dame Georgiana was a most able chairman of committees: orderly, coldly logical and quick in repartee. She was patient and kindly when working with those she liked or respected but ruthlessly direct and impatient with those who by foolishness, thoughtlessness, incompetence or obstinacy stood in her way. Many feared her but none despised her. People who with her “agreed to differ,” remained her warm admirers and friends for she was indeed magnanimous.

Dame Georgiana would have been less than human had she no frailties but her worth towered above these in the true genius she possessed and in her almost regal dignity and understanding.

N. C.