THE REMARKABLE HISTORY OF HYPNOSIS IN NEW ORLEANS (SOCIÉTÉ DU MAGNÉTISME DE LA NOUVELLE ORLÉANS): A Tribute to Dabney Ewin

JOSEPH TRAMONTANA

Private Practice, Baton Rouge & Metairie, Louisiana, USA

Abstract: Dr. Dabney Ewin was a major factor in the revitalization of the New Orleans Society for Clinical Hypnosis (NOSCH) after it had been dormant for many years. This article briefly presents the fascinating history of the society as a tribute to Dr. Ewin, a remarkable physician.

New Orleans Society of Clinical Hypnosis (NOSCH) still has on its letterhead and other correspondence: “Formerly La Société du Magnétisme de la Nouvelle Orléans.” Officially established in 1845 and in existence until the time of the civil war, the society was dormant until, at an interim meeting of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH) in March, 1974, the New Orleans Hypnosis Society applied for component section status and was approved at the ASCH annual meeting, held in New Orleans, in November, 1974.

Tomlinson and Perret (1974; 1975), in their paper titled “Mesmerism in New Orleans, 1845–1861” noted that the theories of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) provided a major area of psychological investigation during the first two thirds of the nineteenth century. Mesmeric sleep, which was later called hypnotism, became a respectable and accepted mode of investigation and treatment through the work of Jean-Martin Charcot. King Louis XVI appointed a Royal Commission of Inquiry in 1784 that included members of the Academie des Sciences, which was chaired by Benjamin Franklin, the first U.S. Ambassador to France. The commission, referred to as the Franklin Commission, rejected Mesmer’s theories, concluding that the main effects are the result of contact, imagination, and imitation.

Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, a French physician, was also a member of this commission. Dr. Guillotin is the person who first proposed the use of a device to carry out death penalties (the guillotine). A somewhat
unknown fact is that Dr. Guillotin did not actually invent the device and later came out against the death penalty.

An article published by Gravitz and Gerton (1986) referred to the New Orleans Société’s place in the early history of hypnosis in America. These authors talked about how this organization, officially established in 1845 and in existence until the time of the Civil War, was the most active and most enduring American (hypnotic) organization of its day. They noted that nothing is known about the organization’s transactions because they were published in a long-defunct Paris-based French-language periodical.

The long history of opposition to mesmerism lasted until the 1870s, when Charcot, known as the father of modern neurology, introduced hypnotism at the Salpêtrière School in Paris. Charcot was said to be interested in hysteria and hypnotism. At a time when the general public was fascinated by “animal magnetism” and “mesmerization,” he considered the ability to be hypnotized as a clinical feature of hysteria. His followers at the Salpêtrière School believed susceptibility to be synonymous with disease (i.e., hysteria). Later, however, they differentiated between “grand hypnosis” (in hysterics) and “petit hypnotisme” that corresponded to “the hypnosis of ordinary people.”

Despite the original rejection of mesmerism, there was active interest in Europe, and several groups were organized in the United States. Individuals in New Orleans were said to have met as an informal group in the 1830s and became formalized, with the publication of a constitution, in 1845.

The New Orleans group had weekly meetings at which activities of societies in Paris and elsewhere were read and discussed. In 1850, Baron du Potet, one of the leaders of the Paris mesmerism organization stated: “Of all the institutions founded in the last few years outside of Paris for the propagation of mesmerism, the one which succeeded best is, without doubt, the Society of Magnetism in New Orleans” (du Potet, 1850, p. 356). Activities of the New Orleans group were reported in the Journal du Magnétisme (Paris) since they did not have their own journal.

So what happened between the demise of the Mesmerism Society during the civil war and it re-establishment in 1974? As noted in my 2012 article (Tramontana, 2012), I asked that question of Dabney when writing that article. At the time, he was still president of NOSCH, having been in that role several times, and he is a former president of ASCH and past president of the American Board of Medical Hypnosis, as well as a Fellow and past Secretary of the Society of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis (SCEH) and a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. Dabney is a professor of general surgery at Tulane University and also a professor in Tulane’s Department of Psychiatry and Biological Sciences, where he teaches clinical hypnosis. He has long
been a leader and top faculty member of ASCH, as well as an author of two scholarly books on hypnosis.

Having received his MD from Tulane 61 years prior to my previous article on the history of NOSCH, he seemed like the “perfect historian.” While he did not remember the exact dates, he remembered that in the early 1970s, he and three colleagues met in his living room and decided to reinitiate the old organization under its original French name. At some point between that meeting and the 1974 ASCH convention in New Orleans, the group began to expand. When there were enough members to apply, they changed the name to NOSCH and applied for and were granted component section status by ASCH, and the group helped to host the 1974 convention.

Dabney does not know what happened in the hypnosis field in New Orleans between the Civil War and the early 1970s, and it is highly likely that there was no organized activity. When you think about the early history, however, New Orleans was the ideal place for hypnosis to grow in popularity. After all, New Orleans was a French Colony and has always been considered more European than other U.S. cities. It was formerly referred to as “Sin City” when from 1897–1917 the Storyville District flourished. This area was known for prostitution, brothels, gambling, and speakeasies. It was modeled after similar areas in Germany and in Dutch ports. New Orleans was always thought to be a little “wicked” and, with its history of voodoo, just a little “mysterious.”

**DR. DABNEY EWIN**

Dr. Dabney Ewin is a dedicated teacher and practitioner of hypnosis. Now 90 years old, he is on the faculty of the Tulane University and Louisiana State University Schools of Medicine. In addition to his academic teaching, he frequently functions on the faculty of SCEH and ASCH. He also provides training in hypnosis worldwide with such organizations as the International Society for Hypnosis (ISH), for whom he recently presented in Paris, France. He has presented at every ISH meeting around the world since Philadelphia in 1976.

In addition to his lectures and workshops, his books, chapters, and articles greatly add to the hypnosis literature. His books include *101 Things I Wish I’d Known When I Started Using Hypnosis* (Ewin, 2009) and Ewin and Eimer (2006) *Ideomotor Signaling for Rapid Hypnoanalysis*. Dabney’s great sense of humor is quite evident in *101 Things*, and he often shares a joke or two with his audiences. Besides his two books, the Ewin and Eimer book contains references to 10 journal articles and nine chapters or articles in edited works.

At the 2015 ASCH meeting in Jacksonville, Florida, he (Ewin, 2015) gave a plenary address on “Spiritual Elements in Mind-Body Healing.”
Bloom (2015) discussed Dabney’s presentation in a letter to the editor in a recent issue of the ASCH journal. He titled that article “A Special Moment of Wisdom.” He talked about how in the Q&A session, when asked by Dr. Bloom about where he is on his bucket list, Dabney gave an eloquent reference to Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, Ulysses. He said that he has “time for a work of noble note, and what am I to do? And what I decided is that what I have got to give is teaching. And that I’ll make myself available to teach anywhere, anytime, anybody who wants to learn what I know about hypnosis” (Bloom, 2015). Bloom noted that Dabney received a standing ovation.

What I especially remember, however, is that this was Dabney’s second standing ovation. After his address, he received the first one. But then Dr. Moshe Torem, who was chairing that session, told Dabney that he had finished with 15 minutes to spare, so there was time for Q&A. Fifteen minutes later, Dabney got the second standing ovation—the one Dr. Bloom acknowledged. Even more significant to the present author was at a workshop immediately following Dabney’s address, in which the workshop leader, Phil Accaria (also a former president of ASCH) began his presentation by asking the participants: “Has anyone in this group ever heard of anyone at ASCH meetings getting two standing ovations?” The answer, including that of the present author, was a resounding “No.”

Dabney has received the Milton Erickson Award of ASCH, the Roy Dorcas Award of SCEH, the Pierre Janet Award of ISH, and the Bernard B. Raginski Award for Leadership and achievement from the SCEH. He is a great teacher, practitioner, colleague, and friend. Based on discussions with workshop participants and presenters at many ASCH and SCEH meetings, as well as with leaders of these groups, including a conversation with the recently deceased Claire Fredericks (personal communication, October 3, 2015), at the recent SCEH conference (she thought this article a great idea), the author knows that there are many people who would fully endorse this tribute.

References


Die bemerkenswerte Geschichte der Hypnose in New Orleans (Société du Magnétisme de la Nouvelle Orléans): Ein Tribut an Dabney Ewin

Joseph Tramontana

Abstract: Dr. Dabney Ewin war ein wesentlicher Faktor in der Revitalisierung der Gesellschaft für Klinische Hypnose in New Orleans (NOSCH), nachdem diese viele Jahre lang ruhte. Dieser Artikel zeigt kurz die faszinierende Geschichte der Gesellschaft als Tribut an Dr. Ewin, einen bemerkenswerten Arzt.

Stephanie Reigel, MD

L’histoire remarquable de l’hypnose à la Nouvelle-Orléans (Société du magnétisme de la Nouvelle-Orléans): un hommage à Dabney Ewin

Joseph Tramontana

Résumé: Le Dr Dabney Ewin a joué un rôle déterminant dans la revitalisation de la Société du magnétisme de la Nouvelle-Orléans (NOSCH) après plusieurs années d’inactivité de celle-ci. Cet article présente brièvement l’histoire fascinante de cette société, en hommage au médecin remarquable qu’était le Dr Ewin.

Johanne Reynault
C. Tr. (STIBC)

La notable historia de la hipnosis en Nuevo Orleans (Société du Magnétisme de la Nouvelle Orléans): Un tributo a Dabney Ewin

Joseph Tramontana

Resumen: El Dr. Dabney Ewin fue uno de los factores principales en la revitalización de la Sociedad de Hipnosis Clínica de Nuevo Orleans (NOSCH por sus siglas en Inglés) después de que estuvo inactiva durante muchos años. Este artículo presenta brevemente la historia fascinante de la sociedad como un tributo al Dr. Ewin, un médico notable.

Omar Sánchez-Armáss Cappello
Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi, Mexico