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Poetry and memory: 150 years of Fort England Psychiatric Hospital

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Automaton(tik): In Remembrance of the Patients of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital

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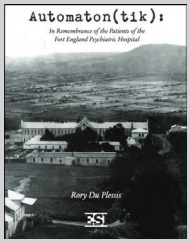

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Review title:
Poetry and memory: 150 years of Fort England Psychiatric Hospital

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With *Automaton(tik): In Remembrance of the Patients of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital* (2025), we are offered a new, and for some a first, reading of the hospital's patient records. The first poem in the introduction speaks personally and collectively to the patients and promises to use the 'loose folio sheets/seldom tallying over a dozen' (p. xxiii) that account for their lives to commemorate them. The collection vividly depicts lives from over a century ago, coinciding with the hospital's 150th anniversary in 2025. The collection goes on to show a remarkable crafting of voices, the organisation of individual portraits and the interplay between the available historical facts and lyrical invention of the sympathetic witness poet. The mix of poetic and biographical elements remains consistent and adds a uniformity to the form of the collection, but does not override the singular nature of the narrative (p. xxii), which makes it an enjoyable reading experience. The poems differ in length (dependent on the available archive of the patient) with no fixed metre or schemes throughout the collection. The structures of individual poems rather flow naturally and in free form but remain linked by the core scope and aesthetic repetition within the collection that results in a unified expression.

The title comes from the first patient in the collection, Robert, a shy man who liked drawing and coining new words. The other poems portray a gardener, the homesick, a prisoner, the religious, many readers, fathers and brothers, dancers, and a tailor (p. xxiv):

> Not knowing the details of your life story,
> I will not write you a eulogy.
> But, with compassion,
> I take the fragments,
> and weave them as precious golden threads
> into impressions of your spirit
> to commemorate your life.

While revisiting and respecting the past, the volume balances confrontation and commemoration: a difficult task, but the volume shows no signs of trade-offs. The poems record 25 lives that were worth living, not lives of 'very little use' (p. xix) as the archived records suggest – 25 lives obscured by misdiagnosis and the institutional erasure reflected in the archival records.

The importance and role of this kind of work is explained in the Introduction. This approach is very effective in contextualising the poems that follow and in presenting a sort of counter-narrative to the case files.

From early on, my expectations of a sombre tone and visuals were thwarted. The poet has selected celebratory scenes that add a gentler emotional register to the collection. Examples include Charles's birthday and George's dancing. The poems suggest that during their many years at the hospital (sometimes referred to as an asylum), the patients experienced moments that represented them as more than merely institutionalised subjects. Many patients often filled their days with playing cards, dancing or comforting duties.

Some poems, for example 'Arthur' (p. 21) and ' George Henry' (p. 28), are dedicated to showing how patients survived through their own autonomy and rebellion, and that they will be remembered because they are 'names and' 'known by heaven and earth' ('Charles Overend', p. 39). In 'George Henry' (p. 28) we read:

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Stripped of sight and hearing,
the outside world
was not shut to you.
[…]
Touch as location,
touch as language,
this sensorial feat
was a miracle to behold.

Each poem concludes with the date the patient was admitted to the hospital, their age at the time, a death date and more notes about their lives. This approach creates the impression of biography alongside the ekphrasis in the poems. Traditionally, ekphrasis provides a literary and dramatic description of visual art, but in this case, archival ekphrasis takes centre stage as the context of the patient records is investigated and expanded. The biographies present the reader with a second voice and, in many of the cases, more information about the lives of the subjects. Together, these two elements strengthen the act of remembrance that Du Plessis sets out to accomplish in 'Charles Overend' (p. 41):

Tell me about that moment,
the one that sustains you
when you are confronted by hardship,
the one that reminds you of your grit,
the one where you summited your mountain

Du Plessis' lyrical portraits are related to his photo exhibits *To Be(Hold) in Revere* (2022) and *I See You* (2025), which explore records, archives, memory, and personality. *Automaton(tik)* is a powerful book of poetry that adds to Du Plessis' body of work.

Du Plessis takes care to remind us that this is not a foreign history or a buried past. This landmark institution, The Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum (now known as the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital), can still be visited and its records accessed and remains a corporeal heritage. As Du Plessis notes in the Introduction, the hospital had commemorated and memorialised its superintendents, not its patients. *Automaton(tik)* seeks to act as a gesture of remembrance of some of these patients and correct this absence with art (p. xxiii):

The fragments cause my head to rise up
like a trombone
from the folios of sorrow
to imagine the other wor(l)ds
that have gone untold

Occasionally, I am surprised to learn something new like this about South Africa, a country I was born and raised in and think I know well enough. But then a book like this comes along, and another aspect of history is illuminated. I finished this collection wondering why I had not learned this before. With an excellent foreword by Geoffrey Reaume and a short historical background and contextualisation by Du Plessis to accompany the 25 poems, the collection is highly thought-provoking and timely and reminds 'us that we are celebrants/in one another's lives' ('Charles Overend', p. 39).

An e-version of the collection can be accessed in the ESI Press catalogue.

Reference

Du Plessis, R., 2025, *Automaton(tik): In remembrance of the patients of the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital*, Emerging Scholars Initiative (ESI Press), Pretoria.