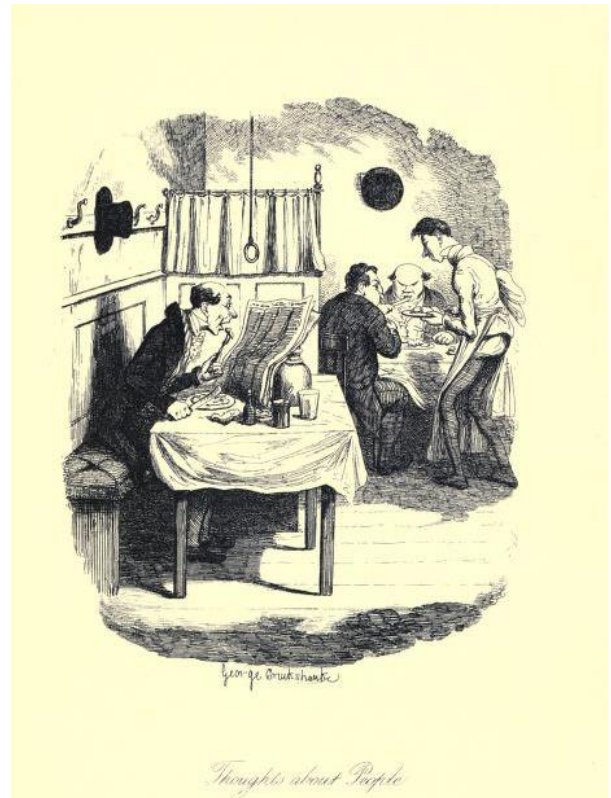


## Solitude and Modernity

8<sup>th</sup> June 2019

University of Oxford – St Anne's College

Co-sponsored by 'Diseases of Modern Life'  
(Oxford) and 'Pathologies of Solitude' (Queen  
Mary University of London)



### Programme

10:30am – Registration and coffee

#### 11am – Welcome and introductions

- Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford) and Barbara Taylor (QMUL)

#### 11:10am – Alone in the Victorian City

- Ushashi Dasgupta (Oxford) – 'Dickens and Loneliness'
- Sarah Green (Oxford) – 'J.M. Barrie and the Solitary Young Man'

12:40pm – Lunch

#### 1:30pm – Solitude and Loneliness in Britain, 1880–2019

- Fay Bound Alberti (York) – 'Modernity and the Lonely Body'
- David Vincent (OU Emeritus) – 'The Minister for Loneliness: solitude becomes a crisis, 1939-2018'

3pm – Coffee

#### 3:30pm – Enforced Solitude

- A dialogue between consultant forensic psychotherapist Gwen Adshead (West London Trust and Central North West London Trust) and researcher Shokoufeh Sakhi (Toronto)

5pm – Drinks reception



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## **Abstracts**

### **Ushashi Dasgupta: ‘Unheeding and Unheeded’: Dickens and Loneliness**

In ‘Thoughts About People’ (1835), later collected in *Sketches by Boz*, Charles Dickens introduces a lonely clerk: just one of countless Londoners whose ‘existence is a matter of interest to no one save himself’. This clerk is ‘unheeding and unheeded’, and ‘his spare pale face look[s] as if it were incapable of bearing the expression of curiosity or interest.’ Dickens was fascinated by the brand of loneliness to be found in the city, among ‘single gentlemen’, poets, and their landladies. This paper will suggest that Dickens was a major thinker on Victorian solitude – perhaps surprising, given his reputation for performative sociability. It will explore the relationship between geography and health, and will ask how emotions build up in certain types of urban space.

### **Sarah Green: ‘Alone in the World’: J.M. Barrie and the Solitary Young Man**

An examination of the organized and commercial cultures that emerged at the end of the century around the figure of the solitary young man, and the involvement of the writer J.M. Barrie in that culture. Best known in its most formal structures – The YMCA, the Social Purity Alliance, the White Cross League, the Scouting Movement – this culture has largely been examined as a means of exerting power, of training young men into a set of British values that encouraged patriarchy at home and empire abroad. This paper will look instead at the way in which the culture imagined itself as a response to the social evil of urban isolation from traditional familial and community structures. It will ask what we can learn from the journal *The Young Man* (1887-1915) about the claims of this culture to provide a ‘safe’ replacement community, which included specialist journals, books, pamphlets, lectures, dedicated clubs, reading societies, and organized holidays, and was emphatic on the importance of constant self-vigilance over one’s moral and physical health. J.M. Barrie, himself at this time a young man living far from his home community in Scotland, wrote several times for *The Young Man*, including a serialized novella entitled *A Superfluous Man* (1889), never to be reprinted in book form. And although Barrie would later find the lonely bachelor man a more fruitful subject for literature, at this time he responded to the context for this story as a discrete genre, within which loneliness and isolation was a definite danger and threat to mental health and even life.

### **Fay Bound Alberti: Modernity and the lonely body**

Drawing on material from the nineteenth century to the present, this paper explores the ways in which loneliness might be positioned as a physical, embodied experience, and what that perception might mean for its identification and treatment.

### **David Vincent: The Minister for Loneliness: Solitude becomes a crisis 1939-2018.**

The paper will examine the emergence of loneliness as a political issue since the second world war. It considers the use and misuse of evidence as new pathways between physical and mental health are identified and translated into government policy.

### **Shokoufeh Sakhi: Surviving Forced Solitude**

I came to Canada as a political refugee in 1992, two years after my release from Evin prison in Tehran. I was a student and a political activist during and after the 1979 revolution. I spent eight years in several prisons in Iran as a prisoner of conscience. Currently, my theoretical and practical work aims at elucidating the possibilities for human resistance to subjugation in any of its forms. My research is on the distinction between ‘ethical’ and ‘survival’ objectives, a distinction through which resistance and capitulation to totalizing regimes may be elucidated.

Living in prison, I experienced first-hand the destructive impact of incarceration and torture inflicted on the human body and psyche; however, I also experienced the need to survive and the desire to protect others, the convolutions of the survival and ethical forces active within human subjects. Witnessing both resistances and capitulations, my experiences provide a basis for insights into the complexities of victim/victimizer relations and potentialities of human subjectivities.

I would like our conversation to explore what happens to the personhood of the prisoner between the time she is removed from society and returned to it. What is the experience of forced solitude? What happens to the sociality of the prisoner in solitary confinement? How did I, for instance, live in the space and time of isolation? How did I survive and resist a mental breakdown? How did I resist the assault on my identity, my values, and my dreams, my sense of who and what I was? Can there be a “guideline” to survive solitary confinement?

### **Gwen Adshead: Carceral solitude**

Prisons and secure psychiatric hospitals regularly use long term segregation as a way of ‘managing’ people whose actions challenge and disturb the institution in some way. These actions are seen as ‘behaviours’ that are risky and therefore need to be controlled. My experience is as a kind of bystander, unsure how or what to say; fearful of being complicit in something cruel, yet also aware of feeling hopeless to effect change. There are layers of mirroring here: of fear and shame, rage and despair; and of course, profound questions about the ethical duties of professionals who visit or work in such places. This is the painful tension that I would like to discuss.