
Confined to a lunatic asylum for eleven years: the case of Haaken Bergh

MEDICAL HISTORY

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Background

Haaken Bergh spent eleven years as a patient in psychiatric institutions in Norway and Sweden in the early twentieth century. Following his discharge from Dikemark Asylum in 1921, he devoted the rest of his life to seeking redress and campaigning for reform of the mental health service. Bergh published two books, brought legal proceedings against Oslo local authority, petitioned the Norwegian parliament (the Storting) for ex-gratia compensation and held lectures throughout Norway. He attracted considerable public attention during his lifetime but was largely forgotten after his death.

Material and method

This article is based on Bergh's books *Levende begravet* (buried alive) (1925) and *Jo galere, jo bedre* (the crazier, the better) (1928), searches in the National Library of Norway's digital collections, a review of Bergh's medical records

from Solna Hospital outside Stockholm and Dikemark Asylum in Norway, and archival material from the Office of the Municipal Finance Director in Oslo relating to Bergh's damages claim.

Results and interpretation

Bergh was a prominent critic of psychiatry, and his books and lectures reached a wide audience. He ultimately received a token ex-gratia payment from the Storting, but the authorities largely ignored him. His criticism mainly concerned the inadequate safeguards governing involuntary admission, the limited expertise in asylums and the need to revise the Insanity Act of 1848. The solitary nature of his campaign and his polemical style probably contributed to his lack of impact.

Haaken Bergh (1870–1939) spent a total of eleven years, between 1903 and 1921, in four psychiatric institutions in Sweden and Norway. After more than eight years at Dikemark Asylum in Norway, he was discharged in 1921. He spent the rest of his life seeking redress for the injustices he believed he had suffered.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Bergh was a prominent public figure. He published two books, pursued a lawsuit concerning unlawful deprivation of liberty against Oslo local authority all the way to the Supreme Court, twice applied to the Storting for ex-gratia compensation and undertook extensive lecture tours. A core focus of his work was reform of the mental health service.

Despite attracting considerable attention during his lifetime, Bergh largely faded into obscurity after his death in 1939. In this article, we present a biographical sketch of his life, with particular emphasis on his experiences in psychiatric institutions and his critique of psychiatric care in the early twentieth century, as expressed in books, newspapers and lectures.

Material and method

The principal sources are Bergh's books *Levende begravet* (buried alive) (1925) and *Jo galere, jo bedre* (the crazier, the better) (1928), as well as searches in the National Library of Norway's online digital collections. We have also drawn on Bergh's medical record from Solna Hospital, and the first author has reviewed his medical record from Dikemark Asylum (approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics, Central Norway, 8 September 2020, reference 144834) and archival material from the Office of the Municipal Finance Director in Oslo relating to Bergh's damages claim.

The National Archives of Norway state that records from Dr Dedichen's Private Asylum no longer exist, and it was not possible to track down Bergh's medical record from Ullevål Hospital.

Who was Haaken Bergh?

Haaken Ludvig Johannes Bergh was born in the former municipality of Hof in Norway's Solør district in 1870. His father, Otto Bergh (1840–76), was a doctor, and his paternal grandfather, Haagen Ludvig Bergh (1809–63), was a priest, member of parliament and President of the Lagting (upper chamber of Norway's former parliament). Several other relatives were also prominent figures of the time: his uncle Johannes (1837–1909) served as the Attorney General, and his aunt Frederikke (1860–1916) was the country's first playwright of children's drama.

Medical records and other sources indicate that Bergh experienced significant loss in his childhood. His mother died in 1873 at the age of 25, when Haaken was three years old. Just over a year later, his father was forced to give up his medical practice and died in 1876 at the age of 26, with the records describing him as 'insane'. The death notice referred to 'long-standing suffering' and severe illness (3).

According to the records, Haaken was adopted by Halvor Bjørneby (1837–1905), a merchant in Fredrikstad and a friend of his father. He attended an upper secondary school in Zurich and subsequently spent seven years working in offices in England, France and Spain. In the spring of 1896, at the age of 26, he established himself as a businessman in Kristiania (now called Oslo). He married Hildur Bjørneby (1876–1936), the daughter of his adoptive father, and the following year they had a daughter, also named Hildur (1899–1905). In contemporary sources, Bergh is described as a businessman, merchant and representative or agent in the coal and coke trade (Figure 1) (4).



Figure 1 Advertisement for Bergh's business in Norges Sjøfartstidende (Norwegian shipping newspaper) in 1900 (4). Facsimile

At the start of the twentieth century, Bergh was one of the best-known young gentlemen in Norway's capital city: elegant, witty, cheerful and always surrounded by a close circle of friends. He was a familiar figure on the high street – 'everyone in the city' knew him – and was regarded as a promising businessman [\(5\)](#).

Solna Hospital

In May 1903, Bergh was invited on a trip to Sweden with family members, where he found himself involuntarily admitted to Solna Hospital, a private psychiatric institution outside Stockholm. The admission had been carefully planned but came as a complete surprise to the indignant Bergh, who maintained that he was completely sane. The hospital records, however, present a different picture.

According to his medical records, Bergh became depressed and irritable in March 1903. He was sleeping poorly and had little interest in his business affairs. Believing that he had a gumma in his nose, he consulted several specialists, none of whom found any evidence of disease. He subsequently became convinced that he had transmitted his illness to his wife and child after observing similar symptoms in them. He further believed that something was wrong with his blood, that his nails were loosening, his beard had stopped growing and that he had intestinal worms. He also feared he would soon go blind. He frequently said that he might have to take his own life because he would not want to live once his nose fell off. Despite these concerns, the doctor did not regard his mental state as genuinely depressive.

Herman Børsum (1862–1923), a practising doctor in Kristiania who had known Bergh for several years and had previously treated him for nervousness and insomnia, wrote in an appendix to Bergh's medical record: 'His thoughts are now almost entirely occupied by the danger he believes he faces as a result of the inadequate treatment of his syphilis'. Bergh himself described the document as 'full of outrageous lies' [\(1, p. 4\)](#).

The stay

In *Levende begravet* (1925), Bergh describes how he came to regard 'my new and for me quite unfamiliar surroundings and my new circle of acquaintances. It was truly a motley and peculiar group' [\(1, p. 5\)](#). He reveals a clear affinity here with the upper classes. A landowner from the south of Sweden repeatedly enters his room to order champagne. There were few distractions, but he 'played a little tennis with the Swedish landowner and the count' [\(1, p. 8\)](#). Bergh complains that 'he is being treated like a poor man, a vagabond, when he is in fact a man of standing from one of the most distinguished families in his homeland and the owner of a very large business' (from Bergh's medical records).

Bergh also mentions a few other patients before concluding, in an almost anthropological tone: 'There were no other patients of interest' [\(1, p. 5\)](#). He is attentive to differences in the severity of illness, noting of the patients on the

second floor that 'their minds were clouded and, in some cases, had come to a complete standstill' (1, p. 5). This tendency towards relativisation is also seen in his descriptions of conditions at the institution: 'The food was not really of the highest quality, but a small beer was served with dinner every evening, and on Midsummer's Day we were given a couple of glasses of punch' (1, p. 7).

Solna Hospital was set in attractive surroundings, but Bergh notes that neither freedom nor beauty filtered into its darkness and misery (1, p. 8). As for the treatment, it 'unfortunately at times left quite a lot to be desired'. Bergh offers an example: while walking in the corridor, he was seized by three sturdy attendants who injected him with a needle. He fainted and suffered after-effects: 'The worst part was that my eyes were severely affected. The pain was terrible, and at times everything would go black' (1, p. 9). Bergh's medical records repeatedly document his anxiety about his eyesight and his hypochondriacal ideas.

Bergh maintained that he had been completely sane at the time of his admission to the asylum, but that the stay had left him 'totally ruined'. 'He rubs his face until the skin breaks open then claims that the wounds prove he is starting to rot away'. His medical records document repeated attempts at self-harm.

In October, the senior consultant informed him that he could return to Norway (1, p. 11). He was a patient in Solna from 11 May to 6 November 1903. His condition was recorded as 'unchanged'. On the first page of his medical record, the diagnosis was entered as 'Dem. paralyt. (?)', dementia paralytica, the terminal stage of neurosyphilis. The diagnosis is not elaborated on and appears to have been incorrect, as this is a progressive and ultimately fatal condition. Bergh lived for another 36 years after leaving Solna and spent much of this time as an active participant in public debate.

Dr Dedichen's Private Asylum and Dikemark

Bergh was transferred to Dr Dedichen's Private Asylum in the Norwegian municipality of Østre Aker; an institution founded in 1901 by Henrik Dedichen (1863–1935) for the wealthy. Bergh was a patient from 6 November 1903 to 20 October 1905, and his wife was also admitted towards the end of his stay. He describes how his daughter had 'died in an accident' and how his marriage broke down. 'Thereupon my happy home life was completely destroyed' (1, 31).

Some time after his discharge in 1905, Bergh attempted to re-establish his business (Figure 2) (6). However, in the autumn of 1912 he again became unwell. He describes being taken by the police from a family dinner and admitted to Ullevål Hospital for observation. On 12 October 1912, he was transferred to Dikemark Asylum, where he remained for more than eight years.



Figure 2 Advertisement for Bergh's business in Morgenbladet (Norwegian national newspaper) in 1909 (6). Facsimile

As is common in long-term patients' medical records, there were lengthy periods with no entries. After January 1915, the record remained entirely silent for two years. In January 1917, brief notes appear: 'Marked lethargy'. A year later, a slight change is noted: 'Unchanged, though better insofar as he has now ceased to be troublesome' (10 January 1918).

A few months later, a 14-line entry appears, in contrast to the one or two lines of the previous five years: 'A significant change has been observed in the patient recently. [...] The patient is not as 'full of himself' as before, calmer and more composed in his demeanour, though he still shows signs of indignance if asked whether he has been ill' (15 April 1918). His medical records repeatedly note in 1918 and 1920 that he lacked 'insight into his illness'.

It is also noted that he was increasingly engaged in writing letters to family, friends and former business associates, and that he was applying for 'various positions in commerce' (1 December 1918).

Then finally, an entry dated 26 May 1921 notes that the supervisory board decided that Bergh could be discharged – 'contrary to the director's advice'.

After discharge

Following his discharge, 'starting a business was hopeless', Bergh later recalled (7), a concern that had also been expressed at Dikemark. On several occasions, the supervisory board considered discharging him, but postponed it because of his 'financial circumstances' (8). According to Bergh himself, he was living 'from hand to mouth' (7). He spent the rest of his life seeking redress for the injustices he believed he had suffered.

The book

Plans for a book are first mentioned in Bergh's medical records in September 1919: 'In recent months he has been enthusiastically engaged in writing a book, entitled 'Det glade vanvid' (the happy madness), in which he discusses mental hospitals and the treatment of mental illness'.

The book was self-published in June 1925 under the title *Levende begravet* (buried alive) (Figures 3 and 4) (9). Its subtitle refers to his stays in asylums for '11 – eleven' years. His periods of confinement: six months at Solna Hospital (1903), two years at Dr Dedichen's Private Asylum (1903–1905), and finally more than eight years at Dikemark Asylum (1912–1921), are recounted in separate chapters. The stay at Solna is described in the greatest detail.



Figure 3 Advertisement in Aftenposten (Norwegian newspaper) for Bergh's first book, 1925 (9). Facsimile



Figure 4 Author's photograph and signature in the book *Levende begravet* (1). 'The author [...] accompanies the book with his portrait, and one immediately recognises a man from the city's streets and cafés who frequently attracts attention due to his restless demeanour and his soliloquising', wrote the Dagbladet newspaper in 1925 (12). Facsimile

Bergh's book was published more than 20 years after he was first admitted to an asylum. Where factual details can be verified, there are notably few discrepancies between his account and the asylum records.

The quality of the writing is inconsistent. The first part of the book, covering Solna, has clear literary merit, but Bergh is unable to maintain this standard throughout. The text is not a cohesive piece of writing. At the very end, he warmly thanks doctors and carers by name, while also reminding the reader of the hell he has found himself in. Bergh never hides his considerable cultural literacy, proposing the construction of a grand entrance portal 'bearing the famous words from Dante's *Inferno*: "Lasciate ogni speranza", which translates to "Abandon all hope" (1. 97).

The reception

The book attracted considerable attention in the press, with one reviewer describing it as 'a brutal indictment' (10). It contained libelous claims and accusations, but many were so extreme they had no credibility. One reviewer noted that 'it will be for the injured parties to decide whether proceedings should be brought against the author. It is hardly conceivable that a book like this could be published without consequences'. While some parts of the book are clear and restrained, and sometimes even insightful, other chapters are 'completely disjointed and, at times, muddled' (10).

The *Middagsavisen* newspaper described the book as sensational. The reviewer noted that readers had no way of knowing whether the serious accusations were true, but emphasised that clarification was needed. The book had caused considerable unease: 'it is high time to put an end to that unease' (11).

Dagbladet reported that the book was selling 'like hot cakes'. The narrative was described as disorganised and the arguments underdeveloped, but it was noted that 'at times he writes sensibly and clearly, and a number of details in the book seem truthful'. 'Even if only a fifth of his story held weight', the paper observed, 'the situation would be dire enough' (12). When contacted by the newspaper, Karl Wefring (1867–1938), the Chief Medical Officer for the mental health service, stated that 'Mr Bergh's account is hardly reliable' (13).

Although *Aftenposten* cast doubt on several factual assertions, it nevertheless maintained that the 'well-written book' highlighted two undeniable social ills: the reckless ease with which individuals were institutionalised, and the unethical commercialisation of asylum care, where private operators profited by detaining patients and extending their treatment duration (14) – a scathing rebuke of Dedichen's asylum.

Writing in *Nationen*, Erling Bjørnson drew parallels to Amalie Skram's novel *Professor Hieronimus* (1895) and its consequences for Professor Knud Pontoppidan, who was forced to resign from his position as director of Copenhagen Municipal Hospital. Bjørnson argued, however, that Bergh's book would not lead to a similar outcome as the author was completely unknown and had no network of family and friends willing to publicly promote the publication (15).

The doctors

From the opening sentence, Bergh makes it clear that one of the main goals is to warn the public, urging them to be 'extremely cautious when consulting a doctor'. Several doctors are singled out by name for harsh criticism, including

Dedichen, whom Bergh regarded as entirely unsuited to psychiatry and 'wholly unqualified for the field' [\(12\)](#).

Bergh's medical records from Solna include a letter from Dedichen to the senior consultant, dated July 1925, in which he notes that Bergh relentlessly attacks every doctor he has encountered. 'He starts with you', Dedichen wrote, 'and works his way through the rest of us. I am the one who has borne the brunt of it, as he is demanding that I be stripped of my licence to practise'. Though he maintained that any medical expert would view the book as completely insane, he warned of the danger it posed: 'Mark my words, it is capable of causing a panic'. A few newspapers had already tailored their reporting to whip up precisely this kind of panic, and Dedichen was convinced that no other colleagues would come to the defence of the accused doctors.

The crazier, the better

Nearly seven years after being discharged from Dikemark, medical records documented a meeting with director Harald Arnesen (1862–1953), after the two encountered each other on the street. Bergh stated that he was going to deliver a luxury-bound edition of his book to the King and the Crown Prince, and he hoped to entice them to attend his inaugural lecture. He planned a year-long nationwide lecture tour. In his view, it was unprecedented for a man to remain fully sane after eleven years in an institution. Arnesen remarked that Bergh looked well and was appropriately dressed. Indeed, Bergh had never felt so well: 'When I awaken in the morning, it is as though pure energy and vitality are pulsing all the way out to my fingers and toes' (18 January 1928).

The first lecture of the tour was held in March 1928 in the presence of Norway's Minister of Social Affairs. Later that year, Bergh issued his next book, which was also self-published. *Jo galere, jo bedre* (1928) was largely based on his lectures. He toured the country talking about his experiences and how the Norwegian health service could be improved. His lecture tour was extensive, popular and regularly covered by the press. A core argument was that the Norwegian Insanity Act 'ought to be revised as soon as possible' [\(16\)](#).

The lectures

There are many first-hand accounts of Bergh's talent as an orator. A reporter described an hour-long non-stop torrent of words, delivered entirely without notes, showing 'a truly phenomenal oratorical power and dazzling verbal agility'. His experience with 'Norway's insanity system' was rooted in memories from 100,000 hours spent in the hazy world of lunatic asylums [\(17\)](#).

Another writer noted how the audience was left 'spiritually paralysed when he finished' [\(18\)](#). The lecture took the form of an 'unbridled, informal chat', peppered with quotes from two Ibsen dramas, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. His goal was to open the public's eyes to the reality that revising the Insanity Act could no longer be delayed. 'He will then have accomplished a fine piece of work' [\(16\)](#).

Bergh's lectures drew packed houses in the late 1920s, and he resumed his touring activities in 1937–38, still enjoying strong press coverage. His arguments and rhetoric were largely unchanged.

He remained active right up until a year before his death (19) (Figure 5) (20). One newspaper described how he lashed out in all directions, dealing blows to laymen and scholars alike. Politics, the church and science were critiqued in his unique style and with an unwavering eloquence, particularly in relation to the 'insanity system'. No one should step 'within the walls' without being thoroughly examined by top experts. He had no faith in the ability of ordinary doctors to treat those with darkened minds, arguing that they should stick to physical health.

Brødrene Hals Konsertbyrå

Torsdag 11. Novbr. kl. 20 Ing. salen
Kronprinsensgt. 17

Haaken Bergh

Foredrag over emnet
„Jo galere, jo bedre“
— Norsk galskapsvesens reform —

Pressen: Foruten at Haaken Bergh er den rene virtuos som taler, byr hans erindringer og kåserier på så meget av interesse, at alle, som har anledning, bør møte frem. **Ingen vil angre det.**

Bill. å kr. 2.— fåes i Norsk Musikforlag 9—4¹/₂. Tlf. 11507.

Figure 5 Advertisement for Haaken Bergh's final lecture series, Morgenbladet (Norwegian national newspaper) 1937 (20). Facsimile

Court case and ex-gratia compensation

In August 1931, Aftenposten reported on its front page that 'Haaken Bergh sues Oslo local authority for damages' [\(21\)](#). The move came after Oslo local authority's executive committee rejected his application for ex-gratia compensation and subsequent mediation attempts in the conciliation board collapsed. Bergh levelled various accusations at the local authority, including that they subjected him to 'unlawful confinement among defective, mentally deranged and dangerous persons at Dikemark Lunatic Asylum'. Acting as his own legal counsel, he sought damages of NOK 350,000.

Counsel for the local authority argued that the case should be dismissed and attempted to persuade Bergh to withdraw his claim. 'It is rare to encounter such a great disparity between allegations and substantiated evidence', he remarked [\(22\)](#). He also argued that no criminal offences had been committed and the claims were in any event time-barred [\(23\)](#).

A number of prominent witnesses were called, including Bergh's childhood friend, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Paal Berg (1873–1968). Also called were two of his old school friends, Attorney General Kristen Johanssen (1869–1949) and director of Sanderud Asylum, Eivind Støren (1870–1937). None of them had noticed anything unusual about him [\(24\)](#).

Oslo local authority prevailed in the case, but Bergh appealed to the Supreme Court, which in June 1935 upheld the City Court's judgment. The outcome was a major disappointment for him. Nevertheless, just one month later he told Aftenposten that he was prepared to pursue the matter further [\(25\)](#).

In May 1936, Bergh applied to the Storting for ex-gratia compensation, but his application was rejected. The following year he tried again. The Standing Committee on Justice examined the case in detail and requested information concerning his admission to the asylum in 1903. However, Solna pointed out that it was a private institution and refused to release Bergh's medical records.

Once again, the claim for compensation was denied. Even so, the Standing Committee felt it was only right to award NOK 3000 'out of special consideration for the applicant's quite exceptionally difficult and tragic life, which might perhaps be eased to some degree by the ex-gratia payment proposed by the majority' [\(26\)](#).

Bergh was an exceptionally resourceful man and fought a long battle for redress for what he regarded as a disproportionate deprivation of liberty. For many years he achieved nothing, until the Storting awarded him a token sum on its second review of the case.

Bergh was part of the social elite and had been a successful businessman with international experience, but he died penniless, with no family, business or friends.

When he died in April 1939 at the age of 68, Dagbladet published an obituary [\(27\)](#). 'His campaign was undoubtedly blinkered, and many of the accusations he made orally and in writing bore hallmarks of that [...]. His style of

presentation was [...] clear and assertive, often bringing a fiery energy to his debates, and he could be highly persuasive because of the insight and genuine compassion that shone through his campaigning'. His lectures 'were very well attended and generally made a profound impression on his audience' (27).

After Bergh's death

A blanket of silence descended after Bergh's death; his books and legal battles were scarcely mentioned. Several patients are discussed in the book *Norsk psykiatri gjennom tidene* (Norwegian psychiatry through the ages), including Carl Halvorsen Paulshus (1871–1955) and Arnold Juklerød (1925–1996), who, like Bergh, spent much of their lives critically examining psychiatry (28). Bergh, however, is not mentioned (28, 29).

The history of psychiatry has traditionally been written from the viewpoint of doctors and institutions, with little heed paid to the patient's perspective (30, 15). Many autobiographical accounts exist, particularly regarding involuntary admissions, but these often remain purely personal and rarely frame individual experiences within a broader context. Among the exceptions are Haaken Bergh and Stella Danner, the pseudonym of Merete Wiger (1921–2015) (31). Our article contributes to this 'history of psychiatry from below'.

During his lifetime, Bergh attracted a great deal of attention. His books, lectures, court battles and campaign for ex-gratia compensation were widely reported, and he was even granted an audience with the King of Norway (32). He proposed mental health care reforms, and his books offer a rare glimpse into what it was like to undergo psychiatric treatment in that era. His radical views attracted attention but were met with a wall of silence from the medical establishment.

Bergh's criticism was directed, in part, at the Insanity Act of 1848, which was not replaced until the Mental Health Act of 1961 (33, 34). In its day, the 1848 Act represented major progress and led to improved conditions for the mentally ill. Over time, however, its effectiveness waned, and the asylums were increasingly characterised by large wards and limited treatment options (30, pp. 113, 493). In practice, they served as custodial care facilities for the poor – including Dikemark, which was established in 1905. By the time Bergh was admitted, it was effectively a psychiatric nursing home (35).

Many of Bergh's criticisms were regarded as justified: the threshold for involuntary admission was too low, staff competence was insufficient (30, pp. 50, 102) and oversight of the asylums was inadequate. These issues have been the subject of debate ever since involuntary admission was enshrined in law (33, 34).

Other aspects of his critique undermined his credibility, such as his proposals to bar women from supervisory boards (1, XVI) and to reintroduce corporal punishment (2, 23). His rhetoric was often vitriolic, branding Norway a country of fools (1, pp. XVII, 86), rife with fakery, hypocrisy, injustice, incompetence, stupidity, coercion and falsehoods (2, pp. 5–6).

Bergh always acted alone. There is little evidence that he sought alliances or participated in broader medical or political debates. His engagement was primarily rooted in his own experiences, which he used as a basis to expose the flaws in contemporary psychiatry.

Ultimately, however, the sheer scope of his criticism, and doubts regarding his lack of insight into his illness and the circumstances surrounding his admissions, likely contributed to the limited impact of his views.

The article has been peer-reviewed.

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