

**Review: *The Premonitions Bureau***

**by Sam Knight**

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In the aftermath of the 1966 disaster at Aberfan, where the local colliery tip engulfed nearby homes and primary school, the village was also overwhelmed with outsiders: people keen to help, to rubberneck, but also make their own investigations.

One of those people was John Barker, a Cambridge-educated psychiatrist with a burgeoning interest in people 'scared to death', the phrase which would later title a book of his research into the subject. He had heard rumours of a boy who had survived the catastrophe and had later died allegedly due to shock, but on arrival to the village, Barker realised his presence was unwanted. Villagers were still in the process of finding victims, and it would have been crass to find out more about the boy.

But, with 116 children and 28 adults dead, and a sense that the catastrophe had been inevitable and, therefore, could have been averted, Aberfan continued to nag at Barker, as it ostensibly did the national psyche. More rumours abounded: a child killed at Aberfan had experienced strange, prophetic dreams; others survived due to chance, last-minute changes in behaviour.

Aberfan proved the tragic stimulus for the creation of The Premonitions Bureau, an initiative established by Barker and a charismatic acquaintance, Peter Fairley, Science Correspondent at *The Evening Standard*, to provide a mechanism to record and investigate events foreseen through visions, dreams and feelings. Publicised by the newspaper, and through Barker's increasingly rising profile, much to the chagrin of his superiors, members of the public were invited to send in their premonitions where they were logged by Jennifer

Preston, Fairley's dedicated assistant whose interest in the occult seemed to make her well placed in tackling the subject. It became her job to categorise and file these unusual telephone calls and letters, liaising with the informants, or 'precipients', as Barker termed them, and comb through the daily news to see how many would be realised.

Understandably, Barker and his Premonitions Bureau were met with derision from medical and psychiatry quarters. The aims of the Bureau, and the ethics and duty of care to its precipients, were hazy. Following the launch of the Bureau, and the national publicity it received, there seemed little collaboration between Barker and Fairley to decide how the Bureau should operate: how long it should run; how precipients should be acknowledged; how the information would be dealt with, other than a vague desire that an 'early warning system' could be established. Two of the Bureau's stars, music teacher Miss Middleton and telephone operator Alan Hencher, whose precise premonitions, we learn, were proved true on multiple occasions, later claimed to be exploited by Barker and his Bureau, though the terms of this exploitation are not thoroughly explored by Knight (money is mentioned in passing).

Knight does not appraise the legacy of the Bureau either, and so it is unclear what impact the Bureau had at the time, or how it might be regarded today. Instead, the book ends with Barker's death, following clear premonitions from both Bureau precipients and the reader. With an increasing workload, we see Barker lurching from one idea to the next, each with their own gruelling regime (a US tour to promote *Scared To Death*; high profile publicity of his research into aversion therapy). His increasingly hostile battles with his professional peers, largely due to his research into taboo subjects such as ESP, the paranormal, the occult and clairvoyancy, and a huge family home renovation can only culminate, to the reader's mind, in one thing: his premature, if precognitive, death.

As such, *The Premonitions Bureau* reads more like a biography of Barker and his 'errant path' than a rigorous exploration of the Bureau itself. This is unsurprising, given his fascinating, prolific – and controversial – professional outputs. His work ethic, his conflicting

interests, and the seemingly bullish way in which he pursues his ideas are a gift for the biographer.

It would have been welcome, however, to have learnt more about the Bureau. We understand that its efficacy is three per cent, the bulk of this success derived from the two aforementioned recipients about whom we discover a great deal, especially Miss Middleton whose presence opens and closes the book and whose memoir must have made Knight's task much easier. Knight concentrates, understandably, on the most precise of Middleton and Hencher's premonitions, but to experience a variety of the other premonitions received at the Bureau, especially the more mundane, would have been particularly appreciated, and the black and white photographs that punctuate the text could have been used to this end. How the proponents of the Bureau, including the assistant, Jennifer Preston, were received by *Evening Standard* colleagues, and the editor, would also have gone some way to contextualising the initiative. Though it is revealed that Preston continued to catalogue 'visions and forebodings ... with care' (p.241) into the 1970s, it is unclear how she viewed her involvement and there is no interrogation of the Bureau's impact on her life, personally or professionally. It is intimated that Barker, as sounding board to these strange prophecies, became unnerved; did Preston, dealing directly with the recipients and their stories, feel the same?

The author also remains curiously absent from the book, aside from one brief personal experience of precognition. Understanding what prompted Knight's investigation into The Premonitions Bureau may indicate how well known it is or was. Has Barker's initiative simply been waiting for the right storyteller to come along, or has it been uncovered from the dusty, unfashionable shelves of psychiatry history?

If these desires illustrate an unsatisfying read, then that is not the intention. *The Premonitions Bureau* offers a compellingly readable insight into an England, a Britain, that seems so much older than its years. That the affairs described in this book originated from the mid twentieth century seems unthinkable, unbelievable: elderly ladies sedated and confined to cells that catch fire in the middle of the night; failed human experiments left to

fester in giant hospitals; a wife whose appearance in the story is resigned to named recipient of letters; and, of course, individuals encouraged to divulge their dreams and visions to strangers in the hope of preventing disaster.

But, as *The Premonitions Bureau* posits, would a premonition occur if a catastrophe is averted? It's a tantalising question, and one which remains open, in this book, for the reader to interpret.