

Dr Donald Ewen Cameron

HE WAS the Scot whose gilded career as the world's leading psychiatrist was mysteriously, and ignominiously, cut short.

They numbered in their hundreds, victims of Dr Donald Ewen Cameron's "brainwashing" experiments now known to have been funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at the height of the Cold War.

Fifty years later - with Cameron and most of his patients now deceased or in mental institutions - much remains murky about the often horrific and secretive research into mental illness at Montreal's Allan Memorial Institute.

Although Cameron's career was otherwise outstanding, including his appointment as first president of the World Psychiatric Association, it is important to consider whether the Scot's reputation could have been besmirched posthumously. (Cameron also took part in the Nuremberg Trial medical tribunal that ruled Rudolf Hess was sane enough to stand trial at the end of the Second World War.)

Aside from myriad conspiracy theorists to have written extensively on the subject, three people inextricably linked to Cameron were interviewed by scotsman.com: a research assistant under Cameron at the Allan Institute; the daughter of a victim awarded thousands in compensation by the CIA; and a man still fighting the Canadian government for compensation, who, incredibly, was in his mother's womb as, he claims, Cameron fed her barbiturates and subjected her to electro-convulsive therapy.

Dr Peter Roper, from Montreal's McGill University, of which the Allan is part and where Cameron began his career after graduating from Glasgow University, is quick and emphatic to point out that medical standards today are far more scrutinised and patient-friendly. He also believes that Cameron's reputation has been "much maligned, posthumously".

"When I first came to the Allan in 1957, Cameron was famous, with patients referred from around the world." Cameron, who founded McGill's psychiatry department in 1943, thought he was helping people with his progressive – yet punishing – treatments.

"He was working on tape recordings, an idea which he felt had to be promulgated, that he had to publish," Roper says. "He had a technician called [Leonard] Rubenstein who modified cassettes so there was an endless tape, it could keep repeating itself for hours at a time. If Cameron could give a positive message, eventually a patient would respond to it."

Cameron would play the tapes to his patients for up to 86 days, as they slipped in and out of insulin-induced comas. The treatment was known as "psychic driving". It attempted to wipe clean the unsuspecting patients' memories and implant other memories on a "clean slate", treatment that was seen as the researcher's potential legacy.

"Cameron was also using massive electro-shock treatments that others had tried, some with good results," Roper adds. "In some of his cases he was using LSD to get more information from patients, a treatment used in Canada at that time for alcoholics."

"Cameron had a visit from a US army colonel, who briefed us on brainwashing techniques," the doctor recalls of the meeting from the late Fifties. "You have to understand this about funding at that time: We had [US] navy and army funds [indirectly] coming into McGill, into almost all departments. I don't think Cameron ever knew the CIA was behind his funding.

"After he died and all this stuff came out, I went down to the CIA headquarters and I got the data and documents," Roper says. "The only one I couldn't get was the final report on his so-called research. It had been 'misplaced'."

It is illegal for the CIA to conduct operations on American soil, hence the intelligence agency's choice of Canada, through a "third party" – in this case Cornell University in New York – to funnel research funds into mind-control projects. The programme was often referred to as MKULTRA, a term developed after American prisoners-of-war in Korea returned home subscribing to Communist ideologies. Some GIs reported details of a "sleep room", where they were incarcerated, fed drugs and tortured.

Leslie Orlikow's mother, Velma, or Val as she was known, was just one of hundreds held without their consent in Cameron's own form of "sleep room".

Val, from Ottawa, and her husband, David, a Canadian member of parliament, now both deceased, and nine others were awarded a total of US\$750,000 by the CIA in an out-of court settlement in 1988. In 2004, after a protracted legal battle, a Canadian judge ruled a further 250 victims, many deceased, would be allowed to seek compensation from a Canadian government that also is alleged to have funded the research.

"My mother had mixed feelings about accepting the money, because the CIA would not accept any responsibility. My mother felt they were complicit," adds Leslie Orlikow, whose parents were adamant that no-one obtained permission from them to conduct the unorthodox treatments.

"I was quite young when my mom went to Montreal the first time, about seven, and would have been 12 or 13 when she went back. It was very painful time for our family. My mom was suffering post-partum depression and rather than getting appropriate treatment [she] was part of mind-control experimentation that left her, and all of us, tremendously damaged."

Val Orlikow had no memory of her husband and children after leaving the Allan, as her mind had been regressed to the age of a toddler. She could not use a toilet. Legal documents explain she received 16 doses of LSD and massive electro-convulsive therapy, in a treatment that involved shocks six times more powerful than the norm. Through sustained treatment from other doctors, remarkably she eventually recovered most of her memory and functions.

The Orlikow family only uncovered Cameron's covert treatments in 1977 after reading about Congressional hearings into the CIA's mind-control experiments. The discovery and resultant legal battle almost tore apart the family.

"My mother thought Cameron was God, he could do no wrong," says Leslie Orlikow. "Then the researchers turned up that Cameron had been paid by the CIA for the mind-control stuff, at which point

my mother just freaked out and was demoralised for a long time.

"I don't think the Canadian government gave them [research patients] a lot of support and it has yet to admit wrongdoing, as has the CIA. They gave some of the surviving people money, but by then, for my mom and dad, it was too late."

Lloyd Schrier is still fighting for the compensation he says he deserves after experiencing Cameron's experiments while in his mother's womb. After reading his mother's medical records, Schrier believes he is lucky to be alive.

"For nine months they could see that my mother was losing weight, taking all the drugs in the 'sleep room'. My mother said she was in the 'sleep room' for a month in the first trimester, still seeing Cameron weekly. The ninth month they didn't want to give her any treatments."

Lloyd, who now lives in Toronto, was born in a separate hospital, with his family around him. He enjoyed a happy childhood.

"We really didn't know very much, only when it came out in the Seventies. My mother didn't know; she'd gone to see other doctors after Cameron and finally got better.

"It's bad what he did, he shouldn't have put a pregnant woman, and me, through that and I'd like to know the whole story."

Of Cameron, born in Bridge of Allan in 1901, Roper remembers "a genuine fellow, a typical Scot in some ways". He continues: "His wife got a tennis blue [competitor] from Glasgow; he died of a heart attack mountain climbing with his son.

"Sometimes, though, in the Allan, if he took a dislike to someone [a colleague], he could be very vengeful. But he was a very good psychiatrist, right up to date; his way of working was well within the limits we had at the time. I think if he were around today he would be able to defend his actions."

Roper blames "politics" in the psychiatric profession for Cameron's sudden departure "under a cloud" from the Allan, in 1964, four years before the end of his contract.

"There was no farewell, no gift, he went - as it were - out the back door without any noise. All his research was tossed out."

Cameron, who died in 1967, left a convoluted legacy of psychiatric brilliance, horrific experimentation and a trail of broken lives. There remains no "smoking gun" that proves Cameron knew his funding came from the CIA. He did not report directly to the CIA, and transcripts from lawyers for the plaintiffs show no direct contact between the spy agency and Cameron on project accountability, funding or research.

The CIA, in recently declassified documents, acknowledges funnelling more than \$60,000 to the Allan over four years, presumably for this research, but the agency and the Canadian government still deny direct responsibility for the experiments.

Many documents relating to the case simply no longer exist or are classified for many years to come.

But it also can never be ruled out that these documents did exist at one time, but have since been "misplaced".