

2002

Book Review of Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901

Michael Ashley Stein

Repository Citation

Stein, Michael Ashley, "Book Review of Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901" (2002). *Faculty Publications*. 706.

<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/706>

Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847–1901.

By DAVID WRIGHT. [Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2001. xii, 244 and (Index) 10 pp. Hardback £40. ISBN 0–19–924639–4.]

UNDER the auspices of the 1808 Asylums Act, twelve county asylums for the institutionalised care of “dangerous idiots and lunatics” were created from 1808 through 1834. The advent of the New Poor Law in that latter year, with its emphasis on economising costs through “relieving” the poor in Union workhouses, resulted in a drastic increase in the number of mentally disabled people under the care of the Poor Law Overseers. Subsequently (and partially in consequence) the Lunatics Act of 1845 directed that all “lunatics, idiots, or persons of unsound mind” be institutionalised in county asylums. The Earlswood Asylum (formerly the National Asylum for Idiots) was the premier establishment for the care of

people with mental disabilities throughout the Victorian era, and the institution upon which a national network would be modelled. This book chronicles and examines the history of the Earlswood Asylum from 1847–1901.

The ten chapters of *Mental Disability in Victorian England* are framed by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction situates the author's study within the growing history of psychiatry. Wright aims to augment the lacunae of existing research on mental disability to "reveal the diversity" of those typified as "insane" during the period. Chapter 1 ("The State and Mental Disability") contextualises the rise of institutions for the mentally disabled within the broader changes in laws governing the treatment of the poor. Of special significance was concentration by parish officers on controlling paupers with dangerous tendencies and treating those who were deemed curable, rather than managing innocuous and incurable individuals with mental disabilities. Chapter 2 ("An Asylum for Idiots") describes how the mid-Victorian perspective on mental impairments influenced the development of the Earlswood Asylum. Complex notions of charity, morality, and professional interests intersected with statutory developments in the Poor Law and the passage of the Lunatics Act, resulting in the erection of an institution that commanded "attention and admiration." In chapter 3 ("Care in the Community") Wright utilises information drawn from Certificates of Insanity, Reception Orders, and census returns to explore the pre-asylum histories of "idiot" children. He concludes that most had previously been looked after in their own homes, and that their care-givers were usually women. Chapter 4 ("Institutionalizing Households") reports on the origins of these institutionalised children. Families who were able to pay for treatment tended to do so on a trial basis, experimenting with the asylum as a substitute for existing household care; poor families whose children were admitted as charitable cases were more likely to have done so out of an inability to care for them at home.

In chapters 5 and 6, respectively, Wright engages two fields of medical historians. Chapter 5 ("Idiots by Election") challenges scholars claiming that the growth of asylums was motivated by self-interested individuals who sought to control socially marginalised individuals. He argues instead that short institutionalisation periods demonstrate an apposite conclusion. An examination of the Earlswood Asylum staff in chapter 6 ("To Know No Weariness") reveals that their work was relatively well-remunerated and frequently led to social advancement: women who came from domestic service returned to advanced positions, men who had worked in the armed services moved into constabulary positions. This finding disputes the traditionally received wisdom that asylum workers were underpaid, unskilful, and uncaring.

Chapter 7 ("The Golden Chain of Charity") profiles the subscribers essential to maintaining the Earlswood Asylum. Many were drawn to the institution's national, educational, and recuperative aspirations. Chapter 8 ("The Educable Idiot") offers a rare view into the daily workings of a Victorian asylum. Piecing together evidence from Earlswood's records and visitors' accounts, Wright describes the vocational training undertaken by the asylum patients. Chapter 9 ("Down's Syndrome") is an account of the work performed at Earlswood by Dr. John Langdon Down, the researcher after whom the syndrome is named. Without being judgmental of observations which fall harshly on contemporary ears, Wright demonstrates

how many of Down's conclusions were harmonious with the growing belief that mental disability was an hereditary, and incurable, defect. Chapter 10 ("The Danger of the Feeble-minded") traces the subsequent history of this belief through the early twentieth century. Consequently, the population of "innocent idiot children" were transformed into "the social danger of the feeble-minded." The conclusion smartly ties together many of the themes presented in the preceding chapters, emphasising that "far from operating on the fringes of Victorian welfare provision, idiots represented an important constituency for Poor Law Overseers in the early modern period."

Mental Disability in Victorian England is an important contribution to the growing socio-legal and socio-medical literature examining the phenomenon of mental disability in the Victorian period. Of particular value is the original and thorough research. Utilising often overlooked documentary materials, Wright's analysis is rigorous from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Well written and presented, it is hoped that the author will continue his efforts to illuminate this developing area of enquiry.

M.A. STEIN