Those They Called Idiots: The Idea of the Disabled Mind from 1700 to the Present Day, by Simon Jarrett, London, Reaktion Books, 2020, 352. pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781789143010

Simon Jarrett's first book provides an insightful and compassionate historical overview of attitudes and policies concerning intellectual disability since the early eighteenth century. Motivated by a desire to reach a wide readership and to inspire critical reflection on our current practices, *Those They Called Idiots* aims to show that today's approach to intellectual disability is far from the only possible option, and to suggest that contemporary society might have much to learn from the past.

Moving chronologically from the early 1700s to the present day, the book is divided into three sections which signal its over-arching argument: those called idiots were very much a part of their communities in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (part 1), but as ideas of citizenship, intelligence, and what it meant to be human all changed over the middle decades of the nineteenth century, an ever-expanding group of idiots and 'imbeciles' was increasingly medicalised, ostracised, and institutionalised (part 2). The negative effects of this change had become particularly potent by the end of the nineteenth century and persisted throughout most of the twentieth (part 3). The focus is England, with occasional diversions abroad when theories or practices seem to have transnational impact, or when contrasting national policies are themselves suggestive. Importantly, *Those They Called Idiots* includes several chapters dedicated to the role of imperialism and racism in shaping ideas in England about how to define a human, a citizen, and an 'idiot.'

Various aspects of this narrative will be familiar to historians of social policy and disability, or of institutions, or 'mental deficiency.' Jarrett's innovation is to use an

impressive array of different types of sources, from joke books to legal treatises to oral histories, connecting seemingly disparate spheres in which 'idiots' or the idea of the idiot can be found. By examining attitudes towards the 'idiot' or 'imbecile' across legal, medical, cultural, imperial, and political contexts, he considers 'the idea of the disabled mind,' as the book's subtitle eloquently puts it, and delivers a persuasive account of the changing place of the 'idiot' in society.

Jarrett's introduction begins with an anecdote to illustrate the origins of his own interest in the subject, as well as one recent aspect of the history he goes on to provide. As a nursing assistant in a 'mental handicap hospital' in the 1980s, he saw a file in which a patient, admitted as a boy in the 1924 and still there sixty years later, was described as a 'bat-eared cretin.' What did this dismissive phrase mean? Why was a hospital seen as the appropriate place for a person described in this way, and had it always been so?

The first three chapters then take the reader back to the eighteenth century, to present a very different approach. Jarrett examines the place of the 'idiot' within English legal proceedings, cultural representations, and empire-building. In civil and criminal law and in jokes and satirical images, he argues, idiots were an everyday presence and were easily identified and understood. They were sometimes mocked or mistreated, but not hated or feared. Yet, Enlightenment thinkers began to draw parallels between the 'savage' abroad and the 'idiot' at home. Jarrett skilfully shows the movement of such ideas from travel writing to legal theory, where narrower ideas of personhood were of great benefit to the processes of colonisation, and from there to the natural sciences.

Chapters 4 to 7 then tackle the middle decades of the nineteenth century as a period of significant change. They focus in turn on forensic medicine, cultural outputs, the human sciences, and finally, the 'great incarceration' as institutions were built specifically to house idiots and imbeciles in their thousands. Moving swiftly over expert and lay evidence about idiocy in court, novelistic depictions, engravings and anatomical drawings, colonial projects, ethnographic and anthropological studies, utilitarian philosophy, evolutionary psychology, and fears associated with urbanisation, the widening franchise, and degeneration, Jarrett paints a bleak picture of decreasing sympathy and tolerance. A source of growing anxiety, the 'idiot' came to be seen as a danger to civilisation itself.

The final two chapters then cover the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in broad strokes. They highlight the persistence of institutionalisation and highly negative attitudes towards intellectual disability in England, even after overtly eugenic approaches began to fall from favour in the 1940s. When mentally defective or intellectually disabled individuals remained in (or returned to) their own homes, Jarrett argues, this was still an incomplete form of belonging. Individuals were subject to excessive control, denied educational opportunities, and granted only partial or conditional access to their community. Activist parents, public scandals revealing abuse in institutions, and new academic theorising are all credited with bringing about some improvements in recent decades, but the book concludes on the cautionary note that the job is far from finished.

Those They Called Idiots draws a sharp dividing line between ideas of idiocy that enabled individuals to live as an integral part of their communities, and attitudes or theories that encouraged hostility and segregation. It is a celebration of eighteenth-century inclusion, and a critique of its transformation over the nineteenth century into forms of exclusion

laced with racism, fear, and disgust. This latter approach is presented as the anomaly, from which contemporary society needs to disentangle itself not by simply closing institutions, but by reshaping itself to accommodate all of its members. At times, Jarrett may overstate the case, smoothing over complexities or uncertainties, but this enables him to cover a lot of ground with clarity and brevity. Written in lively and engaging prose, *Those They Called Idiots* is an attractive and very reasonably priced book (at least by the standards of academic publishing). It provides an accessible and thoughtful overview of an important topic, and deserves to reach the wide audience it seeks.

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