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Madness: a brief history
By Roy Porter
ISBN 0 19 280266 6, price: £11.99 and US$ 22

Roy Porter’s final contribution to the history of medicine, published shortly before his death at 55, is more of an executive summary than a history, even a brief one. But it is a good read, full of provocative insights. Somewhat immodestly described by the author as ‘brief, bold, and unbiased’, the book seeks to assess the credibility of mainstream views of the history of psychiatry as a steady march towards progress and enlightenment. Though he draws back from saying so outright, it is clear that Porter sees only modest evidence of either progress or enlightenment.

In spite of the title, this is not really a history of madness but a history of psychiatry — or rather of the faltering, inconsistent, faddish and often hubristic attempts to determine who is mad, why, and what can be done about it. For each epoch, Porter draws from the ambient culture, expressed in poetry, philosophy or literature, some of the notions, ideologies or outright prejudices that moulded the theory of madness and the clinical responses to it.

For Porter the history of the asylum is emblematic of the instability of both the theory and practice of psychiatry. From the time of Bedlam in London (originally called St Mary of Bethlehem, then Bethlem Royal Hospital, used specifically for the mentally ill from 1402 onwards), the madhouse was the proliferation — while prospects are held increasingly, sophisticated and perhaps no others at all that are written with such well-informed depth of feeling.

McCulloch’s book is a particularly interesting record of asbestos in one country, its relation with the international industry, and its companies, workers and communities. It is inspired by the author’s long-standing interest in the health of workers and their communities, and his commitment to documenting the abuses of power and information that affect them. The publisher is a small, radical one, equally committed to publicizing unusual and important stories, particularly from the South. It forms part of a well-regarded dogma-challenging series called “African Issues”.

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global industry, the mines, the companies, the medical history of asbestos, the difficult lives of the men and women working in the mines, and the role of the state. It includes a critical account of epidemiology in the context of a socially divided African state with a strong transnational company presence, offering valuable insights for anyone with an interest in the interaction of science and policy. A particular strength is in the range of sources the author has brought together, with primary interviews, archives and published books and papers combined to tell a deeply human story of greed, power — and courage.

There is some repetition in the book and it is not for those who like to keep the world neatly divided into disciplinary slices. In examining the complex economic and social processes and their health outcomes, it encompasses the real, messy, political world of public health. In this sense, *Asbestos blues* tells a timely and widely relevant public health story, by documenting the asbestos background of recent ground-breaking rulings against transnational corporations. These may lead to new powers for communities in the South to claim due recognition and compensation for health damage done by companies working in their countries. *Asbestos blues* provides a valuable case study of how a major harmful industry falls, and how in this case communities, unions, epidemiologists, lawyers, public health professionals and a Southern state finally came together to work for public health and social justice. It is a well-told salutary tale.

Carolyn Stephens¹

CORRIGENDUM
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