Book Reviews


Psychiatry today has three salient features: first, the profound uncertainties and ambiguities in the scientific knowledge base which masquerade as facts; second, the pervasiveness of conflicting ideas and values; and third, the complexity of the group process involving professionals, family, the state and the individual by which we come to an agreement about what to do. Evidence, paradox and consensus are the stuff of modern practice. How reassuring then to discover that John Monro’s 1766 case book, his jottings or “aide-memoire” about new and returning patients, suggests that the practice of eighteenth-century mad-doctoring was beguilingly similar in its pragmatic eclecticism and yet fascinatingly different in the detail. The reviewer was reminded of the psychiatric house officers’ shorthand “admission notes” from twenty years ago, when detailed description of symptoms and signs took precedence over personal comment on the status of delusional ideas and aetiological origins.

But the modern shrink reading Monro’s jottings has to beware the diverting but ultimately sterile pleasure of translating eighteenth-century symptoms into DSM-IV diagnoses. Far more important is what his case book tells us about the practice of one of the best known mad-doctors of his day and about the world in which he operated. These then are the themes explored by Jonathan Andrews and Andrew Scull in their second volume about John Monro. The first, Undertaker of the mind: John Monro and mad-doctoring in eighteenth-century England (2001), established the context and professional history of a man who sat at the pinnacle of mainstream, solidly successful, middle-class practice. The John Monro who emerges from this second book is not the Bethlem physician, a post he held from 1751 for four decades, which tenure conferred professional prominence but relatively modest financial reward, nor the wealthy mad-house proprietor who secured the prosperity of his descendants for the next century, but rather the private physician to respectable moneyed, but not necessarily exceptionally wealthy, families who consulted him on a day to day basis. Monro’s complex web of business relations with madhouses at Hoxton and elsewhere, his roaming domiciliary visits, the patients who returned with recurrent episodes of psychosis and the significance of his approach to case management and treatment are scrutinized here by Andrews and Scull in a highly readable and refreshingly immediate narrative. The essential foundations of the critical authority of medical practitioners like Monro, the social roots of their economic success and their subsequent intellectual imperialism over the lives of the mad emerges successfully but so too do the origins of the stigmatized social position of those associated with the dread lunatic. Monro’s fame made him the target of lampooning cartoons and the butt of high society jokes as well as a lucrative practice. Fear and revulsion of the insane still affects the status of professionals in the trade.

The book has relevance for anyone interested in the later and until now rather better researched nineteenth-century alienists and the Victorian asylum, and also in the origins of twentieth-century office psychiatric practice. Much has been written about John Monro and other Monros before but never in this detail and never with Monro’s own rather stolid clinical self speaking directly to us. The authors’ impeccable scholarship in the detail is singularly impressive. This and its companion volume are essential reading for social historians of the eighteenth century. My only quibble is, why on earth two books when one would have
done? The case book lies at the heart of both and without it the first to be published was rather like a birthday party without the cake. But that aside, the value of these two complementary volumes is without a doubt the confirmation that within the social class milieu in which he worked, an eighteenth-century mad-doctor’s management objectives for his patients and their families were in many respects similar to his nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts. No sudden ideological leap separates the approaches to personal mad-doctoring this past three centuries.

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This scholarly and sensitive history of the Denbigh mental hospital in North Wales makes a valuable contribution to the history of psychiatry in its British context. It is not a study that makes a fanfare about its arguments, though briefly in the introduction it is acknowledged that the encounter with this institution has steered the author away from expectations fostered in a reading of Foucault towards an admiration for humanitarian effort and achievement in the face of considerable odds. Thereafter, it slips into a primarily descriptive mode. But this is not to denigrate: it is here that genuine insight and new understanding does constantly emerge, often springing from the smallest detail. With obvious sympathy for history from below, Pamela Michael frames her approach to the history of an institution as one that will place the patient at the centre of things. And there is the intriguing and original ambition to demonstrate how the culture of the patients helped to shape the institution. She does get some way in achieving such objectives. Intriguing stories of patients and their lives are scattered throughout, though often at the end of chapters rather than as central or even integral parts of the main story. Instead, at the centre, animating and holding together the narrative, is what one might call the character of the institution itself. Sitting in its archives, immersing herself in its architecture, and getting to know a staff past and present, who are committed historians in their own right, Pamela Michael has developed an empathy and quality of historical imagination that is often lacking in this type of institutional history. So it is her ability to describe the noise of asylum, for instance, her attention to the minute detail of the “daily round” and “underlife”, not the patient narratives for all their interest, which saves this from being another empty asylum.

The coverage of such a long period, from nineteenth-century roots to twentieth-century dissolution, means that we also have here in miniature a history of modern British mental health care. Since no historian of recent years has managed to put this whole story together, and since Pamela Michael’s command of this long sweep of history is so convincing, the value of the book goes beyond that of a mere case study. This is particularly so when it comes to the less familiar territory of the twentieth century where there are a series of important findings and the demonstration of what policy meant in practice. To some extent, this runs counter to what initially appears to be the book’s central claim for significance: its development of what one might call a Welsh way in lunacy. Such an agenda follows a body of work over the last decade that has qualified an Anglocentric vision of British mental health care with work on Scotland and Ireland, but until now very little on Wales. Denbigh is certainly a good choice with this agenda in mind, not least because of the importance of the Welsh language in the North. Throughout, there is an attempt to probe the significance of the Welsh context, with the opening up of a Welsh social epidemiology shaped in particular by religion perhaps most intriguing. But for much of the time it is far from clear that this was a “Welsh system”, rather than a case study for thinking about provinciality more generally, and