

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

Jarrett, Simon. *Those They Called Idiots: The Idea of the Disabled Mind from 1700 to the Present Day*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. ISBN: 9781789143010

Reviewed by
Patrick McDonagh
Dept of English, Concordia University
patrickmcdonagh@gmail.com

Simon Jarrett's *Those They Called Idiots: The Idea of the Disabled Mind from 1700 to the Present Day* is a comprehensive and insightful exploration into the history of ideas of intellectual disability, especially in the United Kingdom but with many references to Europe and North America. The book focuses primarily on the exchange of popular, legal, and medical conceptions of intellectual disability (Jarrett uses the historically-appropriate terms idiocy, imbecility, mental deficiency, feeble-mindedness, etc., depending on the era under exploration) in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and connects discourses of disability with other parallel narratives, especially colonial discourses linking "idiots" with "savages."

The book comprises an introduction followed by nine chapters and is divided into three sections. Two of these chapters – chapters one and four – were based in part on Jarrett's chapter in a collection I co-edited with Tim Stainton and C.F. Goodey, *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900* (2018), so I was broadly familiar with the material included in these chapters. I had been very impressed with Jarrett's chapter in that collection, and this book maintains the high standard of his previous work. Jarrett has also worked for many years as the editor of *Community Living*, a UK magazine dedicated to advocating for the equal rights of people with learning disabilities (the term used in the UK for what is more commonly known as "intellectual disability" in North America), so he brings a clear perspective of contemporary

issues and concerns to his historical research. His introduction contextualizes his experiences working with people with intellectual disabilities and provides a review of relevant literature, from whiggish histories to critical social histories and eventually cultural and intellectual histories – the category in which his own work most comfortably sits.

The first section, “Idiocy and Imbecility in the Eighteenth Century, c. 1700-1812,” explores popular, cultural, and legal understandings of intellectual disability. Idiocy and imbecility, as these conditions were known, appeared in civil and ecclesiastical courts because of its impact on patrimony, patrilinear succession, and inheritance, and thus cases involved members of the upper classes. People understood to be idiots in the lower classes would appear in criminal courts, but, notes Jarrett, in many cases their condition, attested to by sympathetic neighbours and community members, would lead to reduced sentences or acquittals. Not surprisingly, legal understandings of idiocy or imbecility thus drew heavily on popular understanding of the conditions, and Jarrett traces these through cultural as well as legal representations.

The book provides numerous illustrations, drawing especially on the satirical works of William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, Isaac Cruikshank, and James Gillray to argue that the place of the idiot is resolutely within the community – often as an image of fun, provoking laughter or providing satirical juxtaposition, but still accepted as a part of this community. In this, his work provides an important corrective to notions that the “idiot” has always existed outside of society (or at best peripheral to it) by providing plenty of evidence that people thought of as idiots were well integrated into the eighteenth-century social world. He also notes, however, how the notion of the idiot began to shift with the “age of exploration” and the impact of Enlightenment thought that identified the rational mind as characteristic of civilized

Europeans, with both “idiots” and “primitive” peoples seemingly lacking this quality. By 1799, the French medico-legal theorist François-Emmanuel Fodéré “fused the ideas of idiocy and imbecility with ideas of race and civilization as a medical fact” (118), creating a racial hierarchy based on presumed mental faculty, and formally asserting a link between “idiotic” and “savage” minds.

With this, Jarrett takes us into the second section of the book, “New Ways of Thinking, c.1812-70,” where he poses the question “What made it possible for the idiot to become institutionalized when once they had been part of society?” He then explores the various currents that led to the Great Incarceration, from the 1840s through to the 1970s. One early factor is the early-nineteenth-century use of medical evidence provided by physicians in legal cases to determine whether or not an individual was an “idiot” – even though, as Jarrett’s examples make clear, this medical evidence seemed remarkably like popular and lay understandings of the condition, only partially dressed with the authority of medical terminology expressed in part by vigorous categorization of different forms and levels of mental difference.

Again, Jarrett supports his argument with many compelling case histories, the great majority of which have not previously appeared in histories of intellectual disability. He also explores new cultural representations by William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens, among others, which increasingly present the idiot as an object of pity and sympathy rather than a figure of fun. While this may be seen as a “progressive” response, it also underscores how the idiot fits into the enlightened and industrial world of the nineteenth century. While the French and American revolutions bring a form of democracy to their respective republics, this new political structure is predicated on a capacity for rational decision-making, with the “idiot” becoming an outcast whose very existence serves to demonstrate the need for this rationality. At the same

time, anthropologists are continuing the project of linking race and intelligence, which, not surprisingly, confirms the superiority of the European mind while asserting the idiocy of “savage” peoples. Increasingly, both “savages” and “idiots” were seen as dangerous to rational communities and thus required constraint by a strong authority (colonial or medical), while the less-disabling concept of “imbecility” was used to explain the “developmental progress of some ‘lower races’ without threatening the elevated status of the European” (188), as their learning was not through understanding but imitation and repetition.

Thus we have the medical, (pseudo) scientific, and political movements that lead to what has become known as “the Great Incarceration” – this period began in the 1840s with the construction of asylums for the education of the idiot mind, but these asylums quickly transformed into long-term stay institutions, with their inmates becoming “creatures of the institution.” Thus by the second half of the nineteenth century medicine had gained ultimate authority over those identified as idiots or imbeciles, and the broad societal response to idiocy was one of pity, fear, and loathing.

Jarrett’s final section comprises two, concluding: “From Eugenics to Care in the Community, 1870 to the Present.” Here, he summarizes the rise of eugenics from Francis Galton’s coining of the term in 1883 to the eugenics movement’s collapse after the Nazi’s horrific policies that saw the extermination of undesirable people and “races,” ostensibly to purify the people of the Third Reich. He then explores the growth of parent groups and self-advocacy movements that have led to today’s community living movement, concluding that while conditions in the UK at any rate are much improved for people with intellectual disabilities, we remain faced with much work to do, not least the challenge of “never allow[ing]

the darkness of the institution, or the horrors of the [Nazi] T4 programme, to shame humanity again.”

This book is an engagingly written, intellectually impressive, and absolutely necessary investigation of some of the most significant processes shaping understandings of idiocy, imbecility, etc., in the periods under discussion. While recent years have seen a (modest) growth in intellectual and cultural histories of the idea of idiocy, Jarrett has brought to light areas that have not previously been explored. His analysis of the intersection of popular, legal and medical understandings of idiocy and his investigations into visual representations of idiocy in popular art are entirely new within the field and will no doubt stimulate further research into these areas. As a result, this work is a must for historians interested in intelligence, disability and colonialism, and offers a compelling narrative of how a group of people can be exiled from society – and brought back into it.