

## Book Reviews

MARLENE A. ARIENO, *Victorian lunatics: a social epidemiology of mental illness in mid-nineteenth-century England*, Selinsgrove, Susquehanna University Press, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1989, 8vo, pp. 140, illus., £18.95.

This is a rum work. Professor Arieno presents a history of English policy towards the insane that in effect reinstates the entrenched interpretations of a generation ago. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, she argues, lunatics were treated chiefly in an “inhumane” manner. Then, thanks to what she rather perplexingly labels the new “biological view of man that inspired the physiological psychological paradigm of mental illness” advanced by the Tukes and later moral therapists, a period of therapeutic optimism set in, and inhumane treatment was replaced by “basic humanitarian values”. Above all, addressing the rise of the asylum in the light of the long-term development of the British “social service delivery system”, she argues that, whereas hitherto the “art of public administration” was deficient, it was in the Victorian era that the state finally awoke to its responsibilities, setting up a nationwide system of county asylums as part of that “revolution in government” identified by Professor MacDonagh et al.

In the process, Professor Arieno cocks a doodle at Michel Foucault, Thomas Szasz, and, above all, Andrew Scull, whose “flamboyant” book, *Museums of madness*, “uncritically” embraces the one and “unconditionally” endorses the other. In particular, she takes exception to what she depicts as the view jointly held by this daemonic trio that emergent policy towards the insane served the interests of “social control”, and that reformers were “tools of the bourgeoisie”. On the contrary: in a section entitled ‘The myth of moral management’, she contends that the Victorians were “in good faith” in their desire to help lunatics. Moreover, *pace* the “social control theorists” (“often sociologists”, she reminds us), there cannot have been an imperialist move by medical practitioners to seize control of the mad in early Victorian England, because doctors did not form a coherent profession until the Medical Act of 1858. One of the reasons, she charitably adds, why Scull and others have so egregiously misrepresented the Victorians may be purely semantic: they may be unaware that the “moral” in “moral therapy” has changed its meaning, having in that context nothing to do with “moral” in its modern connotations.

As this summary makes clear, Professor Arieno’s analysis does not reach the level of sophistication required to advance the important debate around the meaning of the institutionalization of the insane. For one thing, Scull himself has cogently argued, in his *Social order/mental disorder: Anglo-American psychiatry in historical perspective* (1989) that questions of “sincerity” are not, and cannot, be what is at issue. (And for a reasoned assault on Scull’s interpretation, see Gerald Grob’s review of this book in *History of Psychiatry*, 1 (2), June 1990). For another, it is extraordinary that Professor Arieno should lump Scull’s reading with Foucault’s and Szasz’s, since Scull has long been an embattled critic of both of them (see several of the essays conveniently reprinted in the above-mentioned book). It is also bizarre that she should characterize Scull as an exponent of a vulgar “social control” hypothesis, since he has himself quite explicitly criticized such views in *Social control and the state* (1981), a work to which Professor Arieno does not refer.

Professor Arieno’s attempt to set the rise of the Victorian asylum in the context of the Victorian administrative state is to be welcomed—historians of psychiatry are often too myopic to see what was going on at Westminster. Nevertheless, her own account of such developments is not nearly so useful as that offered by D. J. Mellett in *The prerogative of asylumdom* (1982), and in ‘Bureaucracy and mental illness: the Commissioners in Lunacy 1845–90’, (*Med. Hist.*, 1981, 25: 221–50), works to which she does not refer. Oddly, she nowhere mentions numerous germane publications on the Victorian asylum by such scholars as Anne Digby, Charlotte Mackenzie, Nancy Tomes, Janet Saunders, and Nicholas Hervey.

Professor Arieno’s monograph does, however, contain one useful section of empirical analysis. An examination of some 2,000 admissions to three mid-Victorian asylums shows that, although for official purposes they were all designated “paupers”, in terms of actual social and occupational background the inmates formed a representative cross-section of the contemporary population at large. In other words, the impression often conveyed by Scull and others that the inmates of the public asylum constituted some sort of outcast group (“the great

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unwanted” is one of Scull’s more graphic phrases) in unwarranted. Such points have, however, already been well made by John K. Walton, for instance in his ‘Casting out and bringing back in Victorian England: pauper lunatics, 1840–1870’, in W. F. Bynum, Roy Porter and Michael Shepherd (eds.), *The anatomy of madness*, vol. 2, (1985), an essay to which she does not refer.

The reader of this book is sometimes stopped in his tracks by puzzling statements. We are told, for instance, that “typhus . . . became a major health problem in 1838 when it was carried to England by countless Irishmen”. On occasion, the prose leads one to doubt one’s own sanity. What is one to make of the following?—“By the end of the eighteenth century it became apparent that the private sector could not adequately fill the need for supervision and care of the insane. The supply of space in private houses far outdistanced the demand for care.” And typos are epidemic. Scull’s *Museum of madness* appeared in 1979, not 1970; there were no such people as Nassua Senior or the “physician”, Thomas Wakely, or J. Brownowski for that matter; nor any such London suburbs as Fulman and Huxton; nor an asylum named Ricehurst. Not least, one pities the mythical W. F. Bynum, Jr, who haunts this sorry volume.

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DANIEL PICK, *Faces of degeneration: a European disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. viii, 275, illus., £27.50, \$39.50.

The appearance of Daniel Pick’s scholarly and imaginative book on the modern European history of degeneration theory testifies to a continuing interest in a species of medical history that does not restrict itself to studies of the institutional, clinical, or laboratory circumstances in which medical ideas and practices are produced. Without ignoring these traditional sources of medical ideas, the authors of this kind of history prefer to emphasize the social and cultural influences on the construction of a medical discourse and to trace its permutations in the language and imagery used in the enviroing society. In *Faces of degeneration*, Daniel Pick employs this strategy to show how the bio-medical concept of degeneration first arose in France, and how doctors, social scientists, and the inhabitants of other cultural domains received and applied it in France, Italy, and Great Britain.

To explain the popularity of degeneration theory, Pick does not adopt a model which assumes “hard” scientific knowledge spreads by replicating itself in other, “softer” discursive domains; nor does he consider degeneration to be a professional ideology that serves the “interests” of medical specialists. Rather, in the manner of recent post-structuralist criticism, he considers how the concept of a retrograde evolution was, to use his term, “inflected” by writers and thinkers in ways that reveal their unique situations as “narrators” of stories about degeneration. To his credit, he does not push this strategy to the point where authors are subsumed into and thus subordinated to their texts. But by identifying the “voices” in which they speak, their uses of irony or metaphor, he can prise out information about their psychological location with respect to their subject, the anxieties it provoked in them, and the degree of confidence they possessed about its cure. He uses this technique to great effect in his treatment of B. A. Morel and Emile Zola and on Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Huxley, and H. G. Wells in their literary ruminations on the biological condition of their fellow man.

Pick also demonstrates that this method can be useful in understanding the ways particular cultures used the concept of degeneration to ponder their respective historical traditions and the trajectories of their nations. Because of their unstable, revolutionary past and the nineteenth-century diminution of their geo-political status, French thinkers regarded degeneration as an invisible, multi-faceted phenomenon that was infecting their whole populace, threatening the vitality and reasonability of élite and mass alike. In Italy, Lombroso and his followers viewed degeneration from the perspective of the problems of a recently-unified state. Instead of a process of degeneration, they saw biologically-tainted individual degenerates, as befits the outlook of an educated élite seeking to subdue the “savages” newly incorporated into their midst. The British, for their part, worried about the “deteriorating” urban residuum in the heart