

Book Reviews

more than any other work available, better inform future students (and future medical historians) about the continuity and changes in the ways in which health and disease have been perceived throughout United States history. This book will serve as an exemplary model for complementary publications that could focus upon different temporal and geographical regions.

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Patricia L Garside and Bruce Jackson,
Model guide to Lancashire mental hospital records, University of Salford, 2001, pp. vi, 87, illus., £5.00 (+ £2.50 p&p). Distributed by: European Studies Research Institute, Telford Building, University of Salford, Salford, Greater Manchester M5 4WT, UK.

In a sense it is surprising that a guide of this kind has not appeared before, given the interest in the history of insanity over the last two decades. But then, as this book itself points out, collaboration between academic researchers and archivists is not a common occurrence. The *Model guide* appeared as a result of one such project between the University of Salford and Lancashire Record Office, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, and the authors are to be congratulated on producing such a useful work in a period of only four months.

Mental hospital records pose particular problems for hard pressed record offices: recent closures have meant that many records have needed saving within a relatively short period of time, yet they are bulky and there are issues of confidentiality of patient records that affect access. Administrative changes to the asylums, the fact that records of any one institution may be split between one or more offices, and the lack of standardization in the way the records themselves are described

(terminology being an additional problem), all add to the difficulties faced by custodians and researchers. Their wide potential research value is underestimated and they are not consulted as frequently as they deserve.

An introductory chapter clarifies these issues, making the point that it is possible, though not easy, for *bona fide* scholars to gain access to patient records less than 100 years old. There is an excellent summary of the legislation affecting key records from 1750 to 1939. Brief histories of twelve Lancashire mental hospitals are given, and a short practical section on how to go about consulting them. Especially useful is the main section, presenting a detailed review and assessment of the records. This goes into detail about the content of different series of records (minutes, reports, journals, financial records, registers, staff records, letter books, etc.) with examples and illustrations from the Lancashire Record Office holdings. A spreadsheet of all the surviving mental hospital record series allows their gaps and strengths to be seen at a glance. Contacts and a brief bibliography of relevant local and general works complete the *Model guide*.

It would be interesting to have a comparative study of a similar number of mental hospitals from another county to compare the survival rate of these records. At present the only other way of doing this is to look at the Wellcome Library/Public Record Office jointly run Hospital Records Database on their websites, although this would not give the same detailed breakdown of information. Hopefully future cataloguing of asylum records will make such analyses possible and encourage archivists to try harder to preserve certain series where there are particular lacunae. The authors request feedback and want to encourage a greater research use to be made of these records. It would be an achievement if they were able to bring out a proposal, as suggested, which would devolve responsibility for giving access to

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these records. Other outcomes should be the improved understanding and higher standards of cataloguing of such archives. There is no ISBN for this publication and one fears that without good marketing it may not have the readership it deserves. A pity, since this is indeed a model of its kind, illuminating the research value of these archive resources to a waiting audience.

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Jan Bondeson, *Buried alive: the terrifying history of our most primal fear*, New York and London, W W Norton, 2001, pp. 320, illus., £18.95 (hardback 0-393-04906-X).

A recent straw poll among nine-year-olds revealed that they were just as aware of the Victorian fear of being buried alive as they were of Alfred and the cakes or the Battle of Hastings. They knew all about bells attached to the surface of the grave and interred corpses trying to escape. This suggests that the “most primal fear” is still with us. So, if people dare to read it, this book should be a great success. It is comprehensive, well-researched, and illustrated with dozens of fascinating pictures. For example, an eighteenth-century “apparently dead lady wakes from her trance when a thief attempts to steal a valuable ring on her finger” and “a brave German doctor administers an enema of tobacco smoke to a corpse”.

The author is a professor of medicine and discusses at some length the history of beliefs regarding the signs of death, a topic that changes and is still disputed, sometimes complicated these days by the desire to “harvest” the organs for re-use. Fifty years ago we listened for a heartbeat, held a mirror in front of the mouth and sometimes got a shock when the patient started to breathe again, preferably *before* one had informed the relatives that he or she had died. Even today, it is not always certain.

From the late eighteenth-century, many countries produced “security coffins”, with windows, air tubes, ropes and bells. In Germany, they built “Waiting Mortuaries” (known as *Leichenhäuser* or “Hospitals for the Dead”) to guard against *Scheintod*, or the *appearance* of death. These were smelly, unpleasant places, though often architecturally magnificent, where corpses were supposed to stay until corruption made it obvious that they really were dead. Unsurprisingly, people refused to bring their dead to them and there were rumours that they were used for secret medical experimentation. Nevertheless, in the state of Württemberg, between 1828 and 1849, it was said that more than a million corpses had passed through and not one had awakened in the mortuaries. Even so, in 1871, the city of Lemburg erected a new *Leichenhaus* with an electric warning system for the corpses’ beds. In Frankfurt each corpse bed had strings leading to a powerful alarm bell and every eight corpses had a watchman. Yet even these “hospitals” were often not trusted. Only a hundred corpses a year were admitted to the Frankfurt *Leichenhaus* before the cholera epidemic of 1869, when the authorities made it obligatory for every corpse to be taken there before burial. The novelist Wilkie Collins used the place as the setting for his 1880 novel, *Jezebel’s daughter*. Like many other Englishmen, he distrusted Continental doctors and, when staying in a hotel abroad, he always put a note on the bedroom mirror saying that in the case of his (presumed) death, he should not be buried until a competent English doctor had been consulted.

We may find all this amusing or bizarre but living people are still being diagnosed as dead. The book is full of such of information. It will amuse, disgust and instruct its readers.

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