

Books



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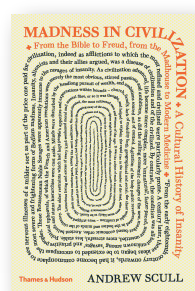
A study covering 3,000 years shows how folk understandings of insanity gave way to science – and paints a bleak picture of the results. By Sarah Wise

Demon doctors

Madness” is now viewed mostly through a medical lens, Andrew Scull points out in his *Madness in Civilization*; and one of the outcomes of this has been the marginalisation of other ways of viewing the loss of reason. Today, we have little time for religious, “folk” or philosophical interpretations of what going insane might mean. We value artistic and literary depictions of disturbed mental states for their pathetic or sensational aspects rather than as explorations of how insanity may provide a corrective for a world that considers itself “normal” – that defines being human as being a creature that can reason.

Scull defends his use of the term “madness”, in place of anything more euphemistic, pointing out that the word has been defiantly reclaimed by those who see themselves as “psychiatric survivors”. “Madness”, what’s more, gets right up the nose of the scientist that has fancied itself so much for the past 150 years or thereabouts and yet has failed to explain the origins of, and cure, the problems of the mind. His account, Scull writes, will “seek to give psychological medicine its due, but no more than its due”.

His wide-ranging survey – covering 3,000 years and voyaging, briefly, to India, China and Japan – chronologically presents factual and imaginative mate-



Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity
by Andrew Scull
Thames & Hudson
£28/Princeton
\$39.50, 448 pages

rial about insanity. Scull, a historian of psychiatry for almost 40 years, has been well-served by his publishers, who have laid on more than 100 black-and-white images and almost 50 high-quality colour plates. The latter range from a 4th-century BC wine vessel depicting Heracles in a maniacal, infanticidal rage, to last year’s spoof Kama Sutra poster by artist William James, which shows the anti-erotic, erectile-suppressing impact of certain antidepressants.

In ancient civilisations, madness was usually seen as a punishment sent by an angry god, or gods; but there was scope, too, for individuals who experienced visions to be regarded as mouthpieces of the divine. The survival of texts from these societies is patchy and the bulk of the material we do have concerns the elites only, so we cannot know the extent of a non-supernatural view of insanity before the works associated with Hippocrates (c460-c370 BC) were

compiled. The Hippocratic, naturalistic view of physical and mental disorders ignored the divine and, so, represented a challenge to “temple medicine”. Instead, the four “humours” were posited as the system by which health, including mental health, was governed.

Christianity would reinstate a divine, punitive rationale for sickness, especially madness, and the miracle cure did not quickly disappear with the Renaissance rediscovery (via Arab scholars) of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine. But as Europe became more prosperous, settled and learned, a sophisticated medical marketplace began to emerge. Robert Burton (1577-1640) wrote that melancholia (or depression) was caused by an excess of the humour black bile and recommended that sufferers turned not away from religion but to the people he described as “God’s intermediate ministers” – doctors. In this way, the divine could be said to be operating through human agency.

This same rise in prosperity and productivity brought with it the urge to identify, classify and contain the disorderly elements of society – among them, the mad who either had no family or community to care for them or whose families could not cope. Medieval lunatics generally wandered or were kept at home; hospitals, such as London’s “Bedlam”, were a rarity. Scull’s breakthrough book of 1979, *Museums of Madness*, broke

new ground in tracing the origins of a specialised insane asylum system, and he returns to the subject here in compelling chapters on the rise of the outsourcing of care for the mad to self-styled experts.

The “trade in lunacy” had arrived and with it a market for fiction and non-fiction that fed upon the notions of Gothically appalling conditions in madhouses and the ease with which the sane could be incarcerated. A very early purveyor of such tales was Eliza Haywood, whose 1726 novella *The Distress’d Orphan; or, Love in a Mad-House* featured the virtuous Annia being shut away by her dastardly uncle Giraldo; it stayed in print for the rest of the century.

Away from the asylum, the anatomical work on the nervous system undertaken by Thomas Willis (1621-1675) had triggered the abandonment of humoral medicine, leading eventually to a remarkable new diagnosis. A cluster of symptoms (low spirits, overexcitement, hypersensitivity) was deemed to comprise “the English Malady”, wrote Dr George Cheyne in his 1733 book of that

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name. The elite could now pay good money to be told that they were “nervous” – and that it was their personal refinement, their “civilization”, that had caused this “illness”, for which a number of expensive therapeutic regimens could be purchased.

It would be another hundred years, writes Scull, before the treatment of mind problems became pre-eminently a medical matter. And this is where his book becomes really dark. More chilling than any medieval casting-out of demons, or the chains and straitjackets of the 18th-century madhouse, the inhumanities of the 20th century fill Scull’s final three chapters. These survey a grotesque series of surgical, electrical and chemical experiments, in which confidently-asserted scientific beliefs were tested on humans. Degeneration theory had satisfied many that these people were worthless genetic material, so why not use their bodies as test-sites? The horrors reach a peak with Hitler’s T-4 programme, in which an estimated 200,000-250,000 of the insane and mentally disabled were “euthanased” by injection or gassing.

Was it the spirit that changed or just the scale of mistreatment of the mad? I’m not sure if it was Scull’s intention but this reader closed the book sickened by recent, not ancient, history.

Today, we have ignorance as our excuse too, but we won’t admit it. After the mass de-carcerations of the late 1980s, we offer the street and prison to far too many ill people, and we pump disobedient or anxious children with chemicals. The developed west refuses to fully fund or fully sympathise with madness and the mad. “Community care was a shell game with no pea,” writes Scull, and it is hard to disagree.

Sarah Wise is author of ‘Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad-Doctors in Victorian England’ (Vintage)

Andrew Scull will be speaking at the FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival on Friday March 27, oxfordliteraryfestival.org

Adventures with the oxygen fairy

How the Victorians used dragons and sprites to teach children about science. By Suzi Feay

We have believed in Mr Gradgrind for far too long,” Melanie Keene announces at the

start of her survey of children’s science writing in the Victorian era. In *Hard Times*, the 1854 novel in which the pedantic schoolmaster appears, Charles Dickens was reacting to what he perceived as a deadening educational tendency to drum facts into children at the expense of joy and imagination. A cow was no longer something that jumped over the moon, but a “graminivorous ruminating quadruped”. An earlier commentator noted as early as 1801 that “dragons and fairies, giants and witches, have vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason”. But as Keene demonstrates, the reality was not nearly so clear-cut.

Indeed, dragons, fairies and magic were recycled in children’s literature as fitting metaphors for the scientific discoveries of the Victorian age. Keene, who teaches history and philosophy of science at the University of Cambridge, organises her material by theme, commencing with dinosaurs and their identification with the dragons of fable. The study of entomology gave rise to the delicate fairy creatures with which the Victorians seemed obsessed. As the dinosaur was conflated with the dragon, so the butterfly became the sprite. Fairies, once Puck-like, enigmatic creatures of doubtful temperament, dwindled: “shrank to Tinkerbell proportions, became be-winged, became benign”.

Among the chief delights of this book are the illustrations, from charming and whimsical to scary. In Lucy Rider Meyer’s *Real Fairy Folks, Or, The Fairyland of Chemistry*, an oxygen fairy holds hands with two hydrogen fairies in a demonstration of chemical bonds. One illustration in Forbes E Winslow’s *Fairy Geography*, showing two children and their mentor prancing through the air in “electric boots”, is downright peculiar. Then there’s the disturbingly sexy “Science Fairy”, as imagined by Edward Linley Sambourne, with nipples showing through her corset and a floating wrap covered with geometrical symbols. Studying these and other weird images, we have to remember that Charles Kingsley’s creepy and maudlin novel *The Water-Babies* (1862-63) was seen as capital childhood fare.

Keene’s material is fascinating, showing how very strange the Victorian imagination could be, but her writing style is unexciting and often unclear. Some of her citations are mystifyingly vague, and material hidden in the notes

would have been better displayed in the text. For example, Benjamin Disraeli, we’re told, “could refer to his monarch in Titania-esque terms”. A note explains: “Disraeli privately referred to the monarch [Victoria] as a *faery*.” So why not just say that?

Alluding to John Cargill Brough’s book *The Fairy Tales of Science*, Keene states: “The book’s title and epigraph were explicitly drawn from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’, a meditation on past, present and future.” A note then states: “Misquoted as the epigraph to Brough”, which sends the reader round in circles. Stylistic infelicities such as using “moniker” to avoid repeating “name” just sound odd.

Keene sometimes has a strange aversion to spelling out the actual title of the book she is discussing. Agnes Catlow’s “introductory work on microscopy” is not at first named, though there is a clue a few paragraphs later in the phrase “Drops of water, as in Catlow’s

Science in Wonderland: The scientific fairy tales of Victorian Britain

by Melanie Keene
Oxford University Press £16.99, 256 pages

eponymous book”. The reader must consult the notes again to discover that the full title is *Drops of Water: Their Marvellous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope*. But alas, all this shows is that Keene doesn’t know what eponymous means. (A title is only an eponym if it features a name, eg *Emma, King Lear*.)

On literary history Keene can be shaky. Gideon Mantell’s 1846 *Thoughts on Animalcules* references William Beckford’s *Vathek*, which she describes as “a popular contemporary oriental tale”. Popular it may have been, but this early Gothic novel had been published 60 years previously. Readers will look in vain for any critical analysis of the more literary texts under consideration, such as *The Water-Babies*. There is some very entertaining and thought-provoking material here, but the way it is displayed doesn’t do much credit to Oxford University Press.

Portrait of the economist as much else besides

This thoughtful biography does justice both to Keynes’s idiosyncracies and to his influence, Peter Clarke writes

As long as the economy is performing reasonably well, we all take it for granted – why not? After all, it seems so natural that we should get a bit richer every year without necessarily working any harder, and that our assets should likewise appreciate in our sleep. But then, to spoil it all, an economist comes along to give us a lecture: “Very few of us realise with conviction the intensely unusual, unstable, complicated, unreliable, temporary nature of the economic organisation by which Western Europe has lived for the last half century.”

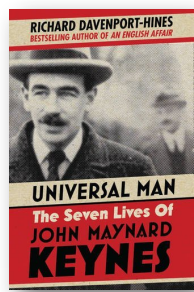
This is not actually a contemporary comment. It is a cautionary reflection dating from 1919, offered by John Maynard Keynes at the beginning of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. This was the book that suddenly made him world-famous. It remains the classic critique of the Treaty of Versailles, as imposed by the victors at the end of the first world war, and established the Keynes brand long before its author, 36 at the time, turned to his trade with due professional seriousness. What is already clearly apparent is his sense of the fragile and provisional basis for our economic expectations and his

subversive scepticism about the universality of any theoretical axioms, however hallowed.

In short, we confront someone who does not conform to the standard model of an academic economist. This alone amply justifies Richard Davenport-Hines in writing *Universal Man*. It is certainly not Keynes with the economics left out but neither is it a work devoted to teasing out the refinements of his economic theory. Instead, with wit and grace, as well as a good deal of scholarly digging, the author looks at Keynes in seven distinct but overlapping guises.

First we have a brief chapter called “Altruist”, which provides a taster for what is to follow. Next, we are given a vivid sense of Keynes’s family background in “Boy Prodigy”, where the strongest presence is that of Keynes’s mother Florence, an early undergraduate at Newnham College, Cambridge – and as a woman unable formally to take a degree in those days. She made up for it in the end by becoming Cambridge’s first woman mayor and was a lifelong influence upon her brilliant elder son, as he marched from early triumphs at Eton and King’s College, Cambridge, to a final eminence as Lord Keynes of Tilton. This family background is well worth exploring, as is, in the third chapter, “Official”, Keynes’s career in first the India Office and the Treasury. This was his ticket to the Paris peace conference in 1919, until he resigned to write his *Economic Consequences*.

Keynes had a love-hate relationship with the Treasury. He simultaneously



Universal Man: The Seven Lives of John Maynard Keynes
by Richard Davenport-Hines
William Collins £18.99
432 pages

admired its scholarly ethos and derided its conventional outlook, as the fourth chapter, “Public Man”, deftly shows. In 1933, for example, Keynes was eager to stimulate a depressed economy through investment in construction. He was incensed that such action was ruled out as “an act of foolish extravagance, which would, in the imbecile idiom of the financial fashion, have ‘mortgaged the future’; though how the construction today of great and glorious works can impoverish the future, no man can see until his mind is beset by false analogies from an irrelevant accountancy.” Exploring such arguments allows the author to penetrate to the heart of Keynes’s thinking as an economist, since many of the theoretical insights developed in his *General Theory* in 1936 had been generated in more immediate policy debates.

With chapter 5, “Lover”, there is a distinct change of key. Here is a closely textured account of Keynes’s sexual peregrination from schoolboy crushes on other boys, through the “higher sodomy” of his undergraduate friends at

Cambridge and into his frankly promiscuous forays on the streets of London when he was a young man. Davenport-Hines explores this territory with shrewdness and sensitivity, suggesting the tension between Keynes’s need to retain his respectable public mien while pressing the boundaries of convention. “Bloomsbury” is important here, of course, as is the successful marriage that Maynard, in his forties, made with the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova.

It was she who literally helped sustain Maynard’s life during the final phase of his career, surveyed in chapter 7, “Envoy”. (The intervening chapter, “Connoisseur”, while containing interesting material, especially on book-collecting, seems less well-focused.) It was with Lydia’s selfless attention that the heart condition that laid Keynes low in 1937 was held at bay, allowing Lord Keynes to emerge during the second world war as a major influence upon domestic economic policy and to play a crucial role in negotiations with the US. Here he always had an intrinsically weak hand to play, pleading on behalf of a virtually bankrupt country. That he managed to have such a creative input on the making of the postwar settlement is in itself a remarkable story.

And it is always, in Davenport-Hines’s hands, a story told in an incisive and thoughtful way. He is not afraid to claim that the *General Theory* was “as important as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in inaugurating an economic era”, and maintains that this enhanced general well-being in the broadest sense. He

comments on Keynes’s encounter with the German negotiator Melchior, during the peace negotiations in 1919, that this “moment when two men accepted their shared humanity and met in generous hope indicates the essence of the word ‘Keynesian’.” It is a rich sense of the word – far from the thin, pejorative stereotype of Keynesian economics as an irresponsible licence to run budget deficits. The book conveys its own

vision of this wholly extraordinary and undeniably idiosyncratic figure with persuasive artistry and conviction.

Peter Clarke is the author of ‘Keynes: The Twentieth Century’s Most Influential Economist’ (Bloomsbury, 2009)

Richard Davenport-Hines will be speaking at the FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival this Sunday (March 22)