



**Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, Kim E. Nielsen, eds.** *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*. Oxford Handbooks Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 552 pp. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-023495-9.

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**Published on** H-Disability (March, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

In their introduction to this illuminating volume, the editors acknowledge that a handbook of disability history is something of a contradiction in terms: producing a handbook on a subject strongly suggests that the field has arrived, but in fact both disability studies and disability history are still struggling to establish their legitimacy as fields of study. This is emphatically not because of any lack of material or any lack of commitment from those within the field itself, as the sheer range of essays in this book amply demonstrates, but because those outside the field have a tendency to regard disability as an individual, private matter and to question whether it is really a category about which anything of value may be said.

The book's introduction defines disability history as "a foundational subfield within disability studies" and states that it first emerged in the 1980s. Disability history accepts the existence of a historical figure's impairment and instead investigates the circumstances surrounding it in order to shed light on "how the experience of inhabiting an anomalous or unusual body/mind changed over time" and to show which factors were particularly instrumental in driving these changes (p. 1). In other words, disability historians show impairment to be an important and relevant category on a par with gender, race, and class.

The importance of disability as a category of historical analysis is made abundantly clear in the wide selection of topics discussed in this volume, which is divided into five subsections, each containing four or five individual chapters. The exception to this is part 1, "Concepts and Questions," which includes ten chapters. The large number of chapters in this section serves to underline both the intellectual rigor and the sheer breadth of disability history. Topics covered in the section range from Kim E. Nielsen's chapter on the benefits that biography can bring to the discipline of disability history—"Telling the life story of someone whose life included disability... unpacking the relationship between that individual life and its larger historical context, and analysing the questions raised by that life have much to offer scholars and readers" (p. 21)—and C. F. Goodey and M. Lynn Rose's chapter exploring how the principles of disability history apply to the study of the Greco-Roman world, to the various chapters pointing out how meaningful and personal assistive objects, such as walking sticks and well-worn prostheses, can be and how powerfully they can conjure up an image of the person who habitually used them.

Part 2 comprises five chapters, all dealing with the vexed question of work and its relationship to disabled people in different geographical locations

and during different historical periods. The locations in question vary considerably, as do the time periods under discussion; for example, while one chapter focuses on the Industrial Revolution in Britain, another focuses on West Africa. This part of the book provides a variety of unusual and illuminating responses to the traditional story told about the intersection of work and disability—at least in Britain before, during, and after the Industrial Revolution. Traditionally, those involved in disability studies accepted the explanation given by Mike Oliver in his seminal text *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) that disabled people could not keep up with the demands of the increasingly mechanized way of working brought by the Industrial Revolution and therefore were forced out of the workplace and into institutions, but this section demonstrates just how incomplete this thesis is. In his chapter “Disability and Work in the Industrial Revolution,” Daniel Blackie argues that this interpretation arises from an overreliance on the experience of disabled people who worked in factories during the Industrial Revolution. In fact, writes Blackie, casting the net a little wider makes it necessary to develop a more nuanced interpretation. To this end, Blackie concentrates instead on coal mining, and he argues that “disability was ubiquitous in Britain’s coalfields in the nineteenth century” (p. 178). To support this statement, he quotes Thomas Burt, who worked in a mine in County Durham in the 1850s: “Never had I seen so many crutches, so many empty jacket sleeves, so many wooden legs” (p. 181). This is surprising, not because mines were not dangerous places to work but because disabled workers were clearly kept on, whereas Oliver’s thesis suggests that this did not happen.

One example of disability prejudice drastically affecting a worker’s life comes in Jeff D. Grischow’s chapter on British West Africa. As West Africa represented part of Britain’s colonies, West African soldiers fought for Britain in both world wars, and needless to say they incurred life-changing injuries while performing their duties. The colonial authori-

ties attempted to address this by superimposing Western models of rehabilitation without considering that West African society was not like British society. For example, rehabilitation centers set up in the 1940s—in Nigeria and colonial Ghana—remained little used, as disabled veterans preferred to return home and pursue culturally valued activities, such as marriage and farming. By contrast, however, veterans regarded as “incurable” (defined as “incapable of any kind of work” under the interim measures introduced in 1941 by Minister for Labour and National Service Ernest Bevin) were barred from participation in rehabilitation programs, meaning that the choice of whether or not to participate was denied them (p. 218). They were instead shepherded into existing institutions in which they did not receive any proper treatment. This does raise a question that the chapter does not really answer: namely, what happened to these “incurable” veterans? Did they return to their villages and resume their lives—albeit in a different way—or were they “thrown on the scrapheap,” remaining trapped in “civilian” institutions? After all, the chapter shows that an effective system of financial and practical support for disabled people had existed since the 1600s. It is rather important to know whether or not all disabled veterans would have been able to benefit from this.

Part 3 looks at institutions. One chapter in particular—Pieter Verstraete and Ylva Söderfeldt’s “Deaf-Blindness and the Institutionalization of Special Education in Nineteenth-Century Europe”—demonstrates that the desire to find disabled people upon whom they could practice their newly developed theories about the education of the impaired was only one of the reasons why Enlightenment philosophers and educators expressed interest in deaf-blind individuals; others wished either to exhibit them as curiosities or to observe them in the hope of providing answers as to how people not in possession of the full complement of senses managed to navigate their way through life. According to the French encyclopedist Denis

Diderot, in his 1749 *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (Letter on the blind for the benefit of the sighted), it was highly probable that a deaf-blind philosopher would regard the fingertips as the seat of the soul, “for thence the greater part of the sensations and all his knowledge are derived” (p. 267). The first section of the chapter explains how individual deaf-blind youngsters were used by Enlightenment philosophers to (supposedly) shed light on matters that the philosophers themselves considered important. For example, when, in 1819, the English geologist and antiquarian Samuel Hibbert came across David Gilbert Tait, a deaf-blind young man who lived with his parents in the Shetland Islands, Hibbert (for whom the realization that Tait was just a deaf-blind person was apparently too taxing) wondered, among other things, if because Tait did not walk upright meant that the “erect attitude” might in fact be “the acquired position of man” (p. 268).

As the editors point out in their introduction, disability history is something of a hybrid that combines the “careful, sometimes stodgy discipline of history” with disability studies—“a feisty interdisciplinary field committed to systemic change and social justice” (p. 3). Indeed, part 3 is notable for the strikingly different ways in which the authors of the various chapters deal with the need to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory requirements. For example, Steven Noll, in his chapter “Institutions for People with Disabilities in North America,” puts such terms as “mad” in quotation marks to indicate their problematic nature (p. 311); Catherine Colborne, in her chapter “Disability and Madness in Australia and New Zealand,” takes a similar approach. The potential difficulty with this, which neither of the above-mentioned chapters quite manages to avoid, is that the discussion becomes binary and focused on theory, to the detriment of what is actually supposed to be discussed. A more thoughtful and discursive approach is taken by Verstraete and Söderfeldt, whose chapter establishes that, although great advances were made during this period regarding the

education of children with sensory impairments, these improvements often had more to do with the educator’s desire to secure their own reputation than with the welfare of the children in question. Nevertheless, a focus on sources rather than theory enables the writers to show that while, for example, Tait’s parents refused Hibbert permission to visit them at such times as would be inconvenient for Tait (a verdict Hibbert appears to have accepted), in the case of Magnus Olsson (born 1844), a Swedish deaf-blind young man who was exhibited by his teacher, Ossian Edmund Borg, the focus—even in Olsson’s own diary—was on Borg and his achievements. The chapter speculates that this difference may be because, while Hibbert was merely a private individual, Borg was a celebrity and the influential head of the oldest Swedish school for deaf children. This does not mean that the chapter contains no theory, but rather that it is illuminated by the case studies used and not the other way around.

Part 4 focuses on representations of disability: in eighteenth-century England, antebellum America, Cold War Hungary, and modern Chinese cinema. Despite the widely differing time periods and countries, there are surprising points of similarity. These are most notable when considering Dora Vargha’s chapter “Polio and Disability in Cold War Hungary” in conjunction with Steven L. Riep’s “Disability in Modern Chinese Cinema.” For example, the issue of “work” in both Communist China and Cold War Hungary was interpreted as being solely applicable to physical labor. As far as the situation in China goes, Riep writes that, due to a mixture of law reforms in the late 1970s and because the Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping had a disabled son, Deng Pufang, who became a prominent disability campaigner and founded the China Disabled Persons’ Federation (CDPF), disabled people became more visible in the public sphere. Despite this, the ways in which they have been portrayed in film are strikingly similar to those in Western films, which are often found wanting by disability campaigners in the West. For example, there is the

stock visually impaired character who is actually possessed of greater insight than the non-disabled characters (*The Blue Kite*, presumably made in the early 1990s); the tragic disabled character who does not make it to the end of the film (*To Live*, 1994); and so on. It might be possible to argue that, in context, these are not stereotypes, but Riep demonstrates a troubling lack of awareness that they usually are. In addition, it is disappointing that the chapter suggests that such improvements as have taken place for the benefit of disabled Chinese people simply happened, underestimating the role of organizations like the CDPF. China may be a country in which it is difficult to become a disability activist, but this makes it all the more important to acknowledge the existence of disability activism in China.

Part 5, “Movements and Identities,” includes four chapters that give insight into the following topics: the interconnectedness and interaction between deaf communities in various Western countries in the nineteenth century, the disability rights movement in the United States, the problematic relationship between disability identity and gay rights in the United States, and the experiences of war-disabled veterans in various Western societies. Each chapter in this section—and in the book as a whole—has something relevant and thought provoking to offer. The chapter on the interconnectedness of deaf organizations in various countries, for example, shows that international cooperation is not new and is valuable. The chapter on the relationship between the US gay rights and disability movements is of great importance, as one “traditional” idea about homosexuality is that it is a mental disorder, classified as such until 1973. So, it is, in a sense, inevitable that gay rights and disability rights have a fraught relationship. I was puzzled, though, that the chapter did not address the problem of many (perhaps most) disabled people not actually being ill. Perhaps this was thought to be a complication too far for a short book chapter!

It is beyond doubt that this book represents a significant development in disability history, offering much inherent interest. I would say, however, that its focus is perhaps a little too Western. The majority of the contributors are based in the United States, and there is a sense that this is the default perspective, when in fact disabled people exist all over the world. However, no single book could possibly include every perspective, and this is a valuable and timely addition to any interested person’s bookshelf.

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**Citation:** Emmeline Burdett. Review of Rembis, Michael; Kudlick, Catherine; Nielsen, Kim E., eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. March, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52943>



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