



Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, Tim Stainton, eds. *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900*. Disability History Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 296 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5261-2531-6.

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Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, and Tim Stainton's edited collection, *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900*, is principally concerned with the historical usage and conceptualization of intellectual disability or, using some of its associated names, "learning disability" or "idiotcy." They offer a welcome analysis of a social group often excluded from research on psychiatric, medical, and even disability history, partly because the "intellectually disabled" or "idiot" did not easily fit into any of those categories. The volume covers an ambitious period stretching from the Middle Ages to the "great confinement" of the nineteenth century. It also explores a wide range of themes, including law, education, literature, religion, philosophy, and psychiatry.

As the title suggests, *Intellectual Disability* is based on a firm theoretical grounding. Rather than assuming a smooth transhistorical continuity as terms, including "idiotcy" and "intellectual disability," blended into one another, the editors set out to assess how these concepts were, in their words, "products of, and contingent upon, specific social and intellectual environments, and perform[ed] specific functions within those environments" (p. 1). The editors seek to find out where these concepts came from, how they connected with one an-

other, and how these connections took place under particular historical circumstances.

Despite the ambitious scope of the volume, the diverse contributions work well in terms of speaking to one another and addressing the core questions laid out in the book's introduction. For instance, Wendy Turner's opening chapter attempts to pin down how those living in the Middle Ages used their own terminology of idiotcy using medieval discussions at court and in the royal administrative records of individuals with "incapacity to manage." As Turner argues, in the Middle Ages intellectual ability referred to whether an individual was intellectually able to carry out his or her responsibilities. Such matters were decided on by legal and administrative officials, not doctors. Idiotcy became legally important as it impinged on issues of inheritance.

A further chapter by Janina Dillig focuses on foolishness in medieval German literature, pointing out that the fool was a complex character. Not every type of folly excluded an individual from society and not all equated to the idea of intellectual disability. The fool was a multidimensional character and the famous court jester was not the only type of fool to be found on the medieval landscape. A subsequent chapter by Goodey argues that concepts of idiotcy were reshaped in the seven-

teenth century, largely by the church. This is followed by an exploration of “cognitive ableism” in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), which D. Christopher Gabbard demonstrates was deeply influenced by the philosophical discourses of John Locke.

As further chapters demonstrate, by the eighteenth century, the idiot was characterized in law as a person unable to understand money, numbers, or social relations, and lacking self-awareness and memory. These defects led to questions being raised about whether they should be awarded any social status at all. It was at this historical juncture that the idiot in law came into sharper social focus, as discussed in depth by Simon Jarrett. While not technically insane, idiots were deemed too unreliable to be trusted to enter into contracts of marriage, make a will, or give voluntary consent. For such reasons, idiocy continued to be an important theme in the early modern court room. And as doctors and psychiatrists became interested in idiocy toward the end of the eighteenth century, new medico-legal discourses emerged. Although it was only in the nineteenth century that medical jurisprudence began to make a stronger legal impression, a battle emerged between law and medicine for authority over the idiot or imbecile.

It was in the nineteenth century that medical and psychiatric interpretations of idiocy became increasingly important, in line with the development of those professions. However, as Murray K. Simpson argues, the relationship of idiocy with other psychiatric disorders remained blurred. Nonetheless, the nineteenth century was undeniably the first time in which conceptual models and systems of classification began to emerge. Questions soon arose about whether or not the idiot should be institutionalized and whether he or she deserved to be incarcerated along with psychiatric patients in asylums. This theme is expanded on in an illuminating chapter by McDonagh that examines the writings of visitors and travelers to such

institutions as the Royal Earlswood Asylum and the National Asylum for Idiots.

Overall, *Intellectual Disability* is an original and compelling work that traces the concept of “idiocy” or “intellectual disability” across an ambitious time frame while still retaining cohesiveness and strength of argument. The volume makes clear the complexity and fluidity of concepts of intellectual disability in a series of accessible and informative chapters. The book will appeal not only to historians of psychiatry and medicine but also to those with an interest in far broader areas, such as the history of religion, law, and other associated areas.

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