Leisure and tourism have been largely neglected in disability histories. Instead, education, institutionalization, and employment have traditionally taken center stage of analyses, inadvertently reinforcing a limited view of the realms in which disability and disabled people operate. In turn, historians of tourism have had little to say about disability, divorcing travel from its embodied aspects. Social scientists and geographers have only recently begun considering disabled tourists through the lens of accessibility, with little if any attention to historical context or trends. This gap in the literature, at the historical intersection between disability and tourism, is where Luciano Maffi and Martino Lorenzo Fagnani make their biggest intellectual contribution.

Using a rich array of archival sources, the authors bring the histories of tourism and disability together through detailed case studies set within nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy. Taking a capacious definition of disability that includes chronic diseases, sensory impairments, and mental illnesses, they eschew narrow commentary in favor of a more general exploration of how embodied differences interacted with tourism. Each chapter centers on a different genre of travel, though their overlaps and blurry edges are made evident throughout.

Chapter 1 centers on health-care tourism, tracing its origins to the therapeutic use of climate, spas, and mineral waters for respiratory ailments during the nineteenth century. Spurred by scientific support for hydrotherapy early in the century, resorts developed in mountainous areas, along coasts, and at hot springs, to accommodate convalescing guests. Maffi and Fagnani detail the logistics involved for associations to organize and finance these vacations designed to improve the health of sick children, including negotiating transportation discounts, designing specific menus, and involving physicians.

Chapter 2 shifts to travel undertaken with friends and family, either because of, or in spite of, health considerations. As the only chapter that does not foreground the efforts of charitable or-
ganizations or educational institutions to provide disabled people with vacation opportunities, the case studies presented here are of individual disabled travelers and their companions. The main contention in this chapter is that disabled tourists relied on their financial resources and personal networks to safely travel in Italy during the nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 turns to religious, specifically Catholic, tourism from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Wading in on debates about the difference between pilgrimage and spiritual tourism, the authors argue that any distinctions were increasingly blurred in the twentieth century as pilgrimage routes encouraged local tourism industries to flourish. As a result, nonreligious entertainment developed around spiritual sites so that visitors increasingly incorporated other leisure activities into their “pilgrimages” and vice versa. Similarly to chapter 1, chapter 3 analyzes the role of associations in providing travel opportunities for groups of disabled people to visit a growing number of spiritual destinations. As with health-care tourism, these destinations were carefully chosen for their therapeutic benefits but also with some hope of a miracle cure. Based on the descriptions of Italian travel writers, it is also suggested that the hospitality, travel, and lodging at Lourdes, Loreto, and Oropa offered a beneficial diversion from ordinary life for sick or disabled visitors.

Finally, chapter 4 considers summer camps for disabled children, especially in the twentieth century. Based on extensive reading of the Milan State archives, the authors use board of directors records, reports by support staff, and institutional magazines to chart the use of recreational summer programs by two institutions: one for “the Deaf and Dumb” and the other for physically frail children. While returning to the themes of charitable funding and healthy environments, Maffi and Fagnani also point to a new postwar effort toward social integration.

Ambitiously covering two centuries of change, Maffi and Fagnani make general observations about long-term trends and locate disability within them. One of their core arguments is that disabled people not only were at the vanguard of modern tourism but also were essential in driving its changes. This point is made explicitly in the conclusion, though the thread of this argument can be traced through earlier chapters. They mention health tourism as the precursor to present-day wellness tourism and argue that both health and religious tourism, often undertaken by travelers seeking relief from an ailment, encouraged the development of local amenities that formed the basis of the modern tourism industry. They also contend that organizations arranging such excursions for disabled people brought their presence in specific destinations, especially in coastal areas, to a critical mass at which it became an economic necessity to cater to them. Across the two centuries, people with disabilities collectively shaped the development of Italy’s local tourism industries and represented early instances of mass tourism.

Although their analysis spans both centuries, most of the case studies concentrate on the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The historical specificity comes through particularly well in their discussion of health-care tourism. Informed by Fagnani’s background in the history of science, they are attentive to the role medical support for hydrotherapy had in driving travel to mineral spas and in shaping the activities offered at these locations. However, later periods seem less tethered to their wider historical contexts. Fascism, for example, is only mentioned in passing to say that the Milanese organizations arranging summer camps for disabled children operated independently of the regime’s ideological influences. Inevitably for any work with such a wide chronological scope, the authors cannot spend too long attending to the historical specificity of each time period. Although at the cost of occasional superficiality, the authors do well to trace broader trends that are arguably more im-
portant than deep contextualization in laying the groundwork for future research in this area.

By exploring the interconnectedness of both phenomena, the book broaches new territory while feeling familiar for social historians. The authors make judicious use of tables to display information and piece together vacation itineraries from official records, holiday guides, and private correspondence. With Maffi’s expertise in economic and social history, the book is especially attuned to the financial and administrative structures of different groups that arranged vacations for disabled people. Throughout, they point to the centrality of philanthropic organizations and individuals, as opposed to state actors, in funding the development of tourist sites and initiatives. They argue that this arrangement made travel possible for disabled people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, at least as part of organized groups, before the explosion of mass tourism in the second half of the twentieth century.

With both authors more aptly described as historians of tourism than of disability, there is little critical reflection on disability itself beyond an outline of the medical-versus-social-model dichotomy. This is reflected in the book’s citations, which are notably light on literature from the discipline, and the casual use of terms like “confined to a wheelchair” (p. 109). As a result, parts of the book are reminiscent of early works in disability history where disabled tourists themselves are minimally present. In particular, chapter 4 reads as a hagiography of those involved in delivering summer camps for disabled children. They praise the Milanese camps for pioneering safe and inclusive vacation opportunities for these youths. Framing the staff’s use of benches to segregate visually impaired children as a creative, diplomatic approach to ensuring safety, they generally accept the institutional perspectives of their sources without questioning the normative assumptions held within them. They further contend that charitable endeavors to provide experiences for disabled tourists were unmotivated by profit and therefore purely benevolent, an assertion that has been heavily challenged by previous scholars.[1]

On the other hand, chapter 2 pays more attention to the experiences and agency of disabled tourists by foregrounding individual experiences. While Maffi and Fagnani’s argument that disabled tourists used personal networks of contacts to facilitate their travels because they were disabled is not necessarily convincing, the case studies themselves offer stimulating accounts of the various roles disability played in excursions on a personal level. They use Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s writing to paint a vivid picture of what impact her and her husband’s disabilities had on their frequent visits to Italy. Maffi and Fagnani show how the couple’s destination choices, motivations, activities, and feelings about specific places were all affected by their fluctuating physical and psychological conditions. This represents a novel use of Wollstonecraft Shelley’s travel writing, which has rarely been considered in terms of either the history of tourism or of disability. In this chapter, they offer Giovanni Marchelli as another exemplar of a disabled tourist, this time in the context of post-unification Italy and its improved railway infrastructure. They give a detailed breakdown of Marchelli’s multi-leg trip with his sons, illustrating how they coped with accessibility issues by taking public carriages and being flexible with their itinerary. Each case study is impressively detailed, providing fertile ground for further analytical work on any or all of the travelers mentioned.

On the whole, the book is heavily skewed toward primary sources. This can be explained, at least in part, by the scarcity of histories written about the intersections of disability and tourism and the authors’ case-study approach. The result is something of a descriptive account with brief paragraphs of analysis sporadically appearing at the start or end of each chapter. Although the case studies weave together a rich array of archival sources to give detailed accounts of specific destin-
ations, organizations, or travelers, their significance seems under-explored. Regardless, there are frequent moments throughout where the reader can identify the seeds of complex arguments. In chapter 3, for example, they suggest that sick people visiting Lourdes were regarded as sincere spiritual pilgrims who were increasingly being crowded out in the twentieth century amid the development of leisure facilities. The idea of disabled travelers as legitimate citizens and healthy travelers as outsiders that they hint at suggests a relationship between disability and belonging that could offer an alternative perspective to common accounts of exclusion. Naturally, as a pioneering text on the combined history of tourism and disability, the authors cannot follow each lead themselves, so these points indicate promising areas of inquiry for future researchers.

Disability and Tourism in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Italy offers a much-needed start to an integrated history of tourism and disability. For disability historians, it is a reminder to consider disability across contexts and beyond distinctly educational, legislative, or occupational settings. For historians of tourism, it highlights how disability has shaped modern tourism from its nineteenth-century roots, rather than merely appearing in the late twentieth century via the language of accessibility. For historians more generally, Maffi and Fagnani’s approach is instructive on how to weave together piecemeal evidence from itineraries, letters, spa treatises, maps, financial records, and travel guides. Although limited in theoretical engagement, the detailed and abundant case studies demonstrate the exciting potential of the topic and will surely stimulate vital research over the coming years.

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