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Essay Review

Who should write the history of psychiatry?

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Walter W. Winslow (2005) *The History of Psychiatry in New Mexico, 1889–1989* (Xlibris [self-published]). Pp. 219. ISBN 1-4134-6986-8.

Alice Davis Wood (2004) *Dr. Francis T. Stribling and Moral Medicine: Curing the Insane at Virginia's Western State Hospital: 1836–1874*. (Xlibris [self-published]). Pp. 292. ISBN 1-4134-4981-6.

Lawrence B. Goodheart (2003) *Mad Yankees: The Hartford Retreat for the Insane and Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press). Pp. xviii + 218. ISBN 1-55849-405-7.

For nearly a half century the history of psychiatry has been a vibrant if contentious subject. Those who have ventured into this field have come from a variety of disciplines, including medical and social history, medicine (especially psychiatry), and the social and behavioural sciences. The result has been twofold. First, there has been an outpouring of books and articles based on wide research in both printed and manuscript sources that has gone well beyond the traditional approach which made the history of psychiatry a history of enlightenment and progress. Secondly, approaches to the subject – to paraphrase Bernard Weisberger's description of the historiography of post-Civil War Reconstruction in the USA – have resulted in a 'dark and bloody' battlefield on which partisans on all sides rush to battle (and destroy) their protagonists (Weisberger, 1959). Those who have ventured into the subject have debated whether hospitals and psychiatrists were serving as repressive instruments of social control; whether the inability of institutions to live up to expectations was simply a perennial concomitant of the human experience or the consequences of malevolent intentions; and whether or not mental disorders were socially constructed or had an existence of their own.

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While many contributions have served to enrich our understanding of both individuals with severe mental disorders and psychiatrists, others have added little. Walter W. Winslow's *The History of Psychiatry in New Mexico, 1889–1989* is an example of the latter. A well-known psychiatrist who was associated for many years with the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine, Winslow decided to prepare a monograph that drew upon a very limited number of primary documents, oral interviews with many of the individuals who played a role in developing psychiatric services in the state, and his own experiences. That the history of psychiatry in New Mexico had potential is clear. It was a new state that lacked the traditions and institutions of older states like Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania, all of which played important roles in shaping mental health services in the USA.

Unfortunately, Winslow approached the subject without knowing anything about the historiography of psychiatry and its institutions or the perils of oral history. In offering such a judgement I am not arguing that only professionally trained historians are qualified to write about this subject, nor am I unsympathetic towards involved laypersons. However, I do insist that those who write history have an unavoidable obligation to become familiar with a very large and rich historical literature as well as the techniques associated with oral history. There is not the slightest evidence that Winslow has read a single monograph or article dealing with the subject. Nor is there any indication that he understood the complexities involved in asking individuals to provide personal recollections. Properly done, oral history requires a great deal of research to ensure that appropriate questions be asked. There is, after all, a crucial distinction between history and memory. History is an attempt to understand the past by using source material in a critical manner. Memory, in contrast, includes the recollections of individuals, often filtered by the passage of decades. While the two may at times overlap, sharp differences often remain.

The result of Winslow's endeavours is to present a list of individuals and institutional changes that lack any interpretative or substantive foundation. It is an example of antiquarianism at its worst.

Alice Davis Wood's biography of Francis T. Stribling is another, albeit different, kind of amateur history. For many years she managed General Electric's technical publications department and offered writing courses for their engineers. After retiring she turned to history and biography. The subject of her study – Dr Francis T. Stribling – was superintendent of Virginia's Western State Hospital from 1836 to 1874, a period in which institutional care of persons with a severe mental disorder was becoming the norm. Stribling was also an active member of the American Association of Hospital Superintendents of the Insane (which in 1921 became the American Psychiatric Association).

Wood's work differs in fundamental respects from that of Winslow. Using annual reports, Stribling's correspondence in the archives of Western State Hospital and other primary sources, she has attempted to portray the life of a nineteenth-century asylum physician. Born in 1810, Stribling briefly

attended the newly-established medical school at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. The school, however, lacked facilities for clinical instruction, and soon concluded an arrangement with the University of Pennsylvania by which Virginia graduates were accepted on an equal basis with other students. Stribling received his medical degree from Pennsylvania, and returned to his native Staunton to practise medicine.

Several years earlier Virginia had created its second mental hospital to serve the western part of the state, and the new facility opened in 1828. At that time a hospital superintendency was an attractive position. The medical profession was beset by rivalries and challenges, and its economic foundation was anything but secure. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century the status of asylum physicians was much higher than that of their medical brethren. When the contract of Western State Hospital's superintendent expired in 1836, Stribling mounted a successful challenge and became superintendent, a position he held for nearly forty years. Wood provides a fairly detailed portrait of his long career.

To her credit, Wood has examined a large mass of valuable primary source material hitherto unused. Nevertheless, she missed a golden opportunity to use her sources in a sophisticated and informed manner. Her glowing and uncritical narrative tends to give Stribling a heroic character. More importantly, Wood is largely unaware of works by historians that have changed our understanding of nineteenth-century psychiatry. Nancy Tomes' superb biography of Thomas S. Kirkbride (1984), for example, illuminated in depth the career of one of the outstanding figures in nineteenth-century asylum psychiatry. Recent biographies of Dorothea L. Dix (who plays a prominent role in Wood's work) transformed our understanding of this important figure (Brown, 1998; Gollaher, 1995), and works by scholars such as Ellen Dwyer (1987) and Peter McCandless (1996) have reshaped our understanding of institutions. Wood's failure to take into account the scholarship of the last four decades largely vitiates her work in primary sources. Moreover, she romanticizes Stribling's life and eschews analysis. Nor does she grasp the problems inherent in nineteenth-century psychiatric theory and therapeutics. The book, therefore, reflects a tradition long-since rendered obsolete by recent scholarship.

In contrast, Lawrence B. Goodheart's *Mad Yankees* is the work of an academic historian who became interested in the Hartford Retreat for the Insane, one of America's oldest private institutions. Opened in 1824, the Retreat was designed to care for private patients, although it accepted a small number of charity cases. Because Connecticut, unlike other northeastern states, failed to create a public hospital, the Retreat accepted increasing numbers of individuals unable to pay the high charges associated with private care. The opening of a public hospital in 1868, however, gave John S. Butler, the Retreat's superintendent, an opportunity to transform his institution into an elite private hospital for affluent individuals, a character that it retained for decades.

Aware of recent scholarship, Goodheart provides a complex history of the Retreat that places its origin and development within a broad context. Avoiding the simplistic accounts of the origin of institutions associated with such figures as Michel Foucault (1961/2006) and David Rothman (1971), he emphasizes the complex forces that created the Retreat, including voluntarism, philanthropy and religion. Institutionalization of persons with severe mental disorders, as Goodheart observes, was not without irony. Those involved in its founding and early history believed that asylum care and treatment held out the promise of recovery. Yet the combined interaction of chronicity and custodial care, costs and class produced ironical outcomes that reflected the profound differences between public and private medicine.

Goodheart's book is an example of institutional history done well. The book focuses largely on the crucial role of physicians and elites, although it does not neglect those social and economic factors that played such a significant role in the evolution of the Retreat. It does not, however, examine the experiences of patients both prior to and including their committal. In this sense it is not on the cutting edge of recent scholarship, which utilizes such hitherto ignored sources as patient records. Institutional character, after all, resulted from the complex interplay of physicians, staff and patients; the latter were by no means inactive participants in shaping their destiny. This said, there is no doubt that Goodheart's monograph is a useful contribution to the history of American institutional psychiatry.

Precisely because of its controversial character, writing about the history of psychiatry is not an easy task. It cannot be written in a vacuum that ignores context and interrelationships. It also requires knowledge about past contributions and a willingness to explore both traditional and non-traditional sources. This is not to imply that the subject should be limited to academic historians. One has only to look at the contributions of such figures as Henry Sigerist, Erwin Ackerknecht, Owsei Temkin, Saul Jarcho and Lester King, trained in medicine but who helped to transform the writing of medical history. Their works have survived the test of time precisely because of their understanding of the complexities and ironies involved in the writing of history. One can only hope that others – regardless of their pedigree – follow their example.

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