

Reviews (Books)

Insanity, Identity and Empire: Immigrants and Institutional Confinement in Australia and New Zealand, 1873–1910. By Catharine Coleborne. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015. 224pp. NZ price: \$189.00. ISBN: 9780719087240.

Catharine Coleborne has been publishing books and articles about Australasian lunatic asylums for a number of years now, and her latest monograph is an impressive addition to this growing body of work. At the core of the book is an analysis of a sample of nearly 4000 patients committed to two mental hospitals between 1873 and 1910, the majority to Melbourne's Yarra Bend Asylum and the rest to Auckland Asylum. Coleborne argues that medical and welfare institutions had a role to play in the creation of white settler identity and that, especially in asylums, we can explore the 'construction of colonial identity through what threatened it' (p.9).

At the beginning of the period in 1873, the majority of inmates in both asylums were immigrants, but by 1910 the locally-born had grown to far exceed the overseas-born. Mobility is therefore a significant theme of the early part of the book. Historians talk about 'settlement' and 'settler societies', but, in fact, as Coleborne notes, immigrants were often 'unsettlers': young, single, aspirational transients; mainly men, but including women as well. Many of them ultimately settled, often after numerous moves, but some never did, not at least until they were incarcerated within the walls of an institution.

Coleborne links asylums to harsh vagrancy laws introduced during the 1850s and 1860s and also to other institutions, notably immigrant and benevolent homes. Removing beggars, vagrants, drunkards, the homeless and potential trouble makers from urban streets was a priority for colonial police forces. The colonies had a 'web' or 'fabric' of welfare institutions catering for the indigent, but, unlike Britain and Ireland, there was no poor law. As a consequence, many of the destitute aged or unemployed sick, who in Britain or Ireland would have ended up in workhouses, in Australia and New Zealand found themselves transferred between different welfare institutions, before finally some arrived in asylums. Committal to a lunatic asylum – or mental hospital, as they were increasingly called after 1900 – therefore often had as much to do with poverty, unemployment, lack of family support, physical illness and old age, as it did with insanity.

Coleborne is interested in how such people were perceived in colonies that prided themselves on their successes. How did the Australasian colonies explain the thousands languishing in their increasingly overcrowded lunatic asylums, whose decision to migrate had obviously not been crowned by success? Even more troubling were those who, despite enjoying all the advantages of colonial birth, still fell prey to madness. While asylums have important stories to tell us about colonial attitudes to poverty and vagrancy (that is, to class), Coleborne argues persuasively that they also have complex stories to tell about anxieties surrounding identity, gender, ethnicity and race.

After a general statistical outline of her asylum populations, Coleborne moves on to three chapters examining in more detail white male and female immigrants and those she calls 'the others'. Asylum case records reveal concerns about men who appeared ill-suited to colonial life: men who suffered heatstroke due to the climate; or men in whom seasonal work and an itinerant lifestyle induced melancholia; or men who succumbed to the ravages of alcoholism or tertiary syphilis. Coleborne argues

that such men exhibited what was seen as a 'weak' or 'flawed' masculinity (p.118), not the sort of resilient, disciplined masculinity extolled by British imperialists and admired by Australasian colonial elites. As for white female immigrants, they too generated a whole series of concerns. How would British and Irish women cope with the demands of tough, pioneering societies, while upholding the ideals of femininity and respectability and producing lots of healthy children? As Coleborne remarks, femininity was, in fact, 'enforced' inside asylums and was treated as a 'measure of sanity' (pp.140–1). Women judged as mentally 'defective' or sexually 'dissolute' – disorders coming to be considered hereditary – were perceived as major threats to the wellbeing of future generations because increases in inmate numbers, especially colonial-born numbers, fuelled fears of 'race decay' (p.164).

The final chapter on 'the others' is devoted partly to the small groups of Chinese and Māori who appear in Coleborne's sample – there are no Indigenous Australians in the sample. Information in the case records is scant, and Coleborne concludes that asylum staff were far more interested in their white patients than in their non-white ones. But, as white Australasian-born inmates began to exceed immigrants, concern focused increasingly on what were termed 'hybrids': those born in the colonies and enjoying the benefits of a healthy climate and lifestyle, but who may have inherited from their immigrant parents a propensity to mental instability or deficiency. Developing ways to identify, classify and control such people became a preoccupation of the mental hygiene movement of the early twentieth century.

On occasion Dr Coleborne's statistical analysis of the patient sample is not altogether correct, and it is a pity that she aggregates her figures for the whole period 1873–1910 rather than breaking them down by decade so that changes over time could be more closely studied. Nevertheless, despite these quibbles, this is without doubt a valuable book. Historians of insanity have often expressed skepticism as to the worth of asylum medical records – and no doubt such documents do pose multiple problems – yet, at the same time, as Coleborne amply demonstrates, they are a remarkable repository of data offering not only insights into the lives of people we might otherwise know little about, but also highlighting the deep anxieties about class, gender, ethnicity and identity that lay just beneath the surface of apparently confident white settler societies like Australia and New Zealand.

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Migration, Ethnicity, and Madness: New Zealand, 1860–1910. By Angela McCarthy. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2015. 234pp. NZ price: \$45. ISBN: 9781927322000 (paperback).

As the title suggests, this volume offers an investigation of migration and ethnicity in New Zealand through the lens of, in the terminology of the day, madness. It first offers contemporary and historical comparisons of New Zealand asylums in an international context, before looking to movements of the insane: those people expelled to the colonies to remove them from Britain; those repatriated to Britain to