
Within the last two decades, those declaring an interest in the history of disability have formed themselves into small but growing and vibrant cross-disciplinary communities of researchers, working to offer fresh perspectives on disability and its representations, and often within an explicitly political framework that seeks to give voice to this ‘disenfranchised’ group of marginal and exploited individuals. Such lofty motivations brought Iain Hutchison to this field, the preface to *A History of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* indicating his overriding wish to place the disabled themselves ‘centre-stage, and not on the periphery,’ and to give ‘voice [to] how they felt about their lives, their circumstances, their frustrations and their aspirations’ (p. vi).

In mining an impressively wide range of sources, including personal correspondence, poor law, and medical records from the Borders to Shetland, and in weaving ‘official’ testimony with the more ‘personal’ accounts of the disabled themselves and their families, Hutchison attempts to provide us with a sensitive account of the disability experience in nineteenth-century Scotland. He considers how people with disabilities were perceived, not just by affluent members of society who sought to direct their lives, but by ‘ordinary’ folk such as agricultural labourers and coal miners, relatives and friends; and more importantly how people with disabilities perceived themselves, and how they viewed the ‘interventionists’ who attempted to control them. The significant contours of their lives are explored during a period of unprecedented industrialization, urbanization and demographic change, and across a diverse geographical environment (close-knit rural and island communities as well as ‘anonymous’ cities), and with enough
personal human detail and affecting stories of specific individuals such as Daft Archie, Blind Alick, and Petticoat Dan to bring the text engagingly to life. Individuals’ experience of acceptance and integration or otherwise into local communities varied considerably, it seems, due to the very diversity of the Scottish landscape as well as the nature of their particular impairment.

Another welcome addition to the historiography of disability is the way in which Hutchison teases out the agency of disabled individuals and groups. While frequently stereotyped in their characteristics and behaviour, many would actively attempt to contradict expectations, with notable – if subtle – acts of resistance by individuals attempting to reject societal labels and to achieve a measure of respect and acceptance within the contexts of their family and wider community. Furthermore, if ‘normal’ society had its perceptions of disability, so too had the disabled themselves, resulting in the informal development of a disability hierarchy based on individual concepts of cultural, social, physical and mental condition. Though fluid to some extent, in broad terms this hierarchy had ‘blind and deaf people jockeying for the top position’ and those with mental impairments languishing at the bottom (p. 89). That is not, however, to imply that these voices spoke in unison, with marked variations in perceptions and experiences through both time and space.

Hutchison also reinforces our understanding of the relationship between disability, employment and economics. Being ‘disabled’ was not a direct reference to physical or mental impairment, but to societal expectations of an individual’s ability to support himself. As such, a ‘disabled’ person might just as likely be an abandoned or widowed mother of young children in good health as it might a cripple or lunatic. Disability was overwhelmingly an economic category in Victorian society. Industrialization undermined community efforts to absorb financially burdensome members, causing the disabled increasingly to be institutionalised. Scotland’s blind asylums went to great lengths to occupy their inmates in training and economic production, and to emphasise to outsiders that they were capable of ‘continuous and remunerative employment’ (p. 76). That said, the employment categories for which they were prepared were narrow, confined primarily to rope making, carpentry, mattress manufacture and basket weaving.

My reservation is the book’s methodology. Hutchison
adopts a ‘holistic’ view of disability in considering mental, physical and sensory disability of both a temporary and permanent nature. While his enthusiasm for a ‘rounded,’ all-inclusive study is surely to be commended, the net is cast a little too wide for my liking, with some snags occurring. I remain confused as to why those afflicted with tuberculosis can be considered alongside the blind and deaf, and why infirmaries are discussed on a par with ‘custodial’ asylums. To be sure, arriving at a working definition of what constitutes ‘disability’ is a complex business. It is noted that the disabled lacked a common identity until well into the twentieth century, and that nineteenth-century Scots ‘with impairments did not see themselves as having anything in common under a general condition called “disability,” nor did the wider society in which they lived’ (p. 328).

Hutchison makes extensive use of institutional source material, yet notes that institutional confinement and medical intervention were, for many, applicable ‘for very small portions of their lives, if at all’ (p. 331). The ‘common denominator’ linking these individuals is claimed to be their having experienced the stigmatising effect of being regarded as the ‘other,’ but surely this applies equally to those minorities set apart, for example, by their race, religion, or sexual preference. On the other hand, historians of psychiatry may be perplexed by the simple conflation of ‘insanity’ and ‘imbecility,’ generally considered to be two quite separate afflictions, and all under the anachronistic banner of ‘mental impairment.’

These concerns of definition and methodology notwithstanding, *A History of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* is to be commended for its ambitious attempt to link together various disenfranchised societal groups, and to begin to provide them with a voice.

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