Beyond Asylums

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Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (eds)

'MADNESS' IN AUSTRALIA: HISTORIES, HERITAGE AND THE ASYLUM
UQP, $35pb, 283pp, 0 7022 3406 0

There is burgeoning interest in the history of psychiatric institutions and services in Australia. Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon’s ‘Madness’ in Australia now sits alongside Stephen Garton’s Medicine and Madness (1998), Milton Lewis’s Managing Madness (1988) and numerous articles on the subject that have been published in recent years in local journals of medicine and psychiatry. Perhaps this interest represents the desire to record for posterity the role of the asylum and older-style treatments in the care of the mentally ill, in the wake of new, cutting-edge national mental health policies and agendas. Possibly, the fascination represents an unconscious, necessarily forlorn attempt to undo, through revisiting, some of the abuses of psychiatric methods in the past. Whatever the reason, one of the problems faced by a slim tome such as this is that mental health services in Australia, since their inception, have been characterised by an extraordinary level of complexity and diversity. To capture their essence in a small, multi-author volume, and to provide a coherent, integrated synopsis, as the editors might have hoped, is probably not achievable. If, however, we are to view ‘Madness’ in Australia with less aspiration — as a collection of essays devoted to different, often novel, aspects of asylums and institutions — then it becomes an absorbing and welcome addition to the literature and furthers our understanding of these grand edifices.

Previous accounts and critiques of asylums and the asylum movement in other parts of the world (such as Erving Goffman’s seminal text Asylums (1961), Andrew Scull’s Museums of Madness (1979) and the work of the late Roy Porter) are more focused than Coleborne and MacKinnon’s offering. The sweep of the new book is indeed broad. For example, there is a section covering our country’s fascination with custodial practices and the interface between law and history, and another examining the various dimensions of asylum ‘space’ — physical space, space with characteristic sounds (the ‘soundscape’), in which musical therapy has a role, and space used to exert control over gender. A further section considers collections of psychiatric art and their meaning, and the adaptive reuse of asylums.

It transpires, as recorded in almost all chapters, that abuse of patients has dogged asylums throughout the country since the first lunatic asylum was established at Castle Hill, New South Wales, in 1811. Using the example of South Australian institutions, the humane ‘ideal asylum’ that John Connelly had mapped out in England in the mid-nineteenth century was not easily replicated here, for reasons that are obscure. Further, the ready establishment of a gender hierarchy within asylums facilitated the expression of violence by attendants towards patients. Admittedly, efforts were made regularly to inspect asylums so that conditions might be improved, but inspectors were often hamstrung by oppressive workloads; we learn that, when he commenced work in Victoria in 1863, Edward Paley was inspector of several asylums, lunacy wards and receiving houses, in addition to being superintendent of the 900-bed Yarra Bend Asylum.

How do Coleborne and MacKinnon view the so-called ‘mad doctor’ in the asylum system? In short, as rather too quick to apply labels and ‘pathologise’. For example, by ignoring the ‘culture’ of asylum sounds, aberrant sounds are too hastily dismissed by doctors as hallucinations mandating intervention. Similarly, the medical fraternity had the transsexual Harcourt Payne deemed insane and incarcerated very swiftly in 1939, solely on the basis of his sexual identity and preference.

The book leaves the reader with greater knowledge and new insights regarding psychiatric institutions in Australia. Of course, the subject matter — the asylum — is intrinsically appealing. Magnificent buildings on vast open land, often by a river, have natural charm. A chequered history adds an element of intrigue. For this reviewer, an ever-present risk is that the real attraction — be it for staff member, visitor to the site, author–researcher or reader — lies in the striking physical characteristics and setting rather than the ‘core business’ of the asylum, namely compassionate treatment and care of those with mental illness. In other words, the patient becomes the justification and context for examining the asylum, rather than the other way round. In the current post-asylum era of ‘deinstitutionalisation’, an age of less flamboyant treatments in less glamorous settings, in a climate of ever-challenged or dwindling mental health budgets and resources, is the lot of today’s mentally ill so captivating to the wider community? Does the plight of those ‘one in five Australians’ with less dramatic forms of mental illness, or with illnesses thankfully muted by modern treatments, capture the imagination of the public? I have my doubts.