

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Troubled By Faith Insanity and the Supernatural in the Age of the Asylum by Owen Davies**

Hardback and Digital formats, 368 pages  
Oxford University Press  
September 2023  
ISBN: 978-0198873006

Professor Davies has written an impressively sourced book which not only offers a comprehensive account of the history of psychiatry and psychiatrists but also poses questions of relevance today. What is madness? Can this be a subjective opinion or does it mean that a person's actions are incomprehensible, or are they simply eccentric? He puts the study of madness in a cultural framework and provides fascinating insights into the beliefs and behaviour of individuals considered 'mad'.

Davies's anecdotes add interest to the book and appeal for the general reader. Fascinating are the explanations as to the way many expressions have become an accepted part of speech: 'frightened to death', 'the work of the devil', 'the hair of a dog'. The latter originally being the idea that hairs from a rabid dog being placed on a wound could be a cure.

He asks, by a prodigious examination of individual case notes, why so-called irrational beliefs continued in the nineteenth century as the number of asylum patients grew and by using such notes the individual patient becomes more than a number. From reasons for entry to asylums and treatment given, Davies moves to analyse the role of religion and the supernatural world of witches, spirits and fairies in the diagnosis of madness. He places new developments in science and technology in a cultural framework. When not understood, irrational fear of changes in society such as 'electricker' could lead to a diagnosis of madness.

Overall, the book is a fascinating read and adds considerably to our understanding of 'madness' in an ever-changing world. Davies's epilogue gives much food for thought: belief might now have become separated from insanity and the supernatural normalized, but social media provides a platform for the dispersal of what to many would be considered irrational thought and behaviour.

**Elizabeth Wood**  
**October 2023**

Published online at [www.bshh.org.uk](http://www.bshh.org.uk).