

BOOK REVIEW

PETTY TYRRANY AND SOULLESS DISCIPLINE? Patients, Policy and Public Mental Health in England 1918-1930

by Claire Hilton

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Claire Hilton, a retired old age psychiatrist, is central to nurturing interest in the History of Psychiatry within the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Now, she has followed her last book “Civilian Lunatic Asylums During the First World War” with another where she combines previous scholarship, testimonies and writings with her own extensive research, including interviewing patients’ descendants.

The book is well structured over seven chapters, covering the context and methodology of the work, public perceptions, patient experiences, staff and treatment, and regulation. Perhaps reflecting her moral priorities, the longest chapter is the one on daily life in the hospital where she cites multiple examples of discrimination, abuse, and dehumanisation of the “inmates”. In a later chapter, the failure of regulators to act with curiosity, integrity or courage is particularly notable, something familiar to us too. Hilton writes in detail clearly and with compassion, care and integrity. She digresses repeatedly from England to comparisons with other countries, both within the UK and beyond, and addresses matters from a range of perspectives.

Hilton’s is a historicist account. The past is back there to be found and she is committed to describe it as “objectively as possible.” This leads her not to examine the very concept of mental illness but to allow the term to stand as it emerges from its use at the time. Thus, she reads history with the grain, but in a meticulously nuanced way. In this study, she finds that some doctors are to blame, others not, yet others passionate advocates for change and improvement.

The epilogue “Then and now” reflects in detail on significant similarities of problems in mental health services decades apart and this is a notable strength of the volume. She observes that the provision of good mental health care is a “wicked problem”: “Wicked problems are associated with confusing information; with individuals, groups and decision makers championing conflicting values; with baffling ramifications; and often, proposed solutions do not cure them. Wicked problems are hard to solve and require a multi-faceted process spanning far wider than professional groupings. No one group is to blame. Stakeholders across society need to work collaboratively, creatively and honestly” (p. 239). Based on this she takes aim at Michel Foucault and Andrew Scull who she associates with peddling “single issue mythologies.”

This book is of interest to anyone thinking about past mental health services, but particularly useful for anyone studying formally the period. Others will have much to learn from the wealth of detail and careful weighing up of different sides of arguments in this book.

George Ikkos
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