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Investigating the Body in the Victorian Asylum: Doctors, Patients and Practices, Jennifer Wallis. Palgrave Macmillan (2017). 276 pages, £20 hardcover.

Jennifer Wallis's innovative and rigorously researched monograph explores a thus far neglected theme in the history of psychiatry: the place of the body of the asylum patient amidst the materialist fervour of late nineteenth-century alienism. Combining the history of psychiatry with the history of the body in a novel format, Wallis's scrutiny of different parts of the ailing body reconfigures the Victorian asylum as a site of active scientific research and retrieves the interacting agencies of the practitioner, the patient's body and newly developed medical technologies. In doing so, this book shows how both scientific and social histories can unfold from a consideration of the patient's body.

Wallis is at present a Lecturer in Cultural and Intellectual History at Queen Mary University of London. This book, published as part of Palgrave Macmillan's Mental Health in Historical Perspective series, began as Wallis's doctoral project, although not as it was originally conceived. Researching the well-preserved records of the West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum in Wakefield, Yorkshire (which subsequently became the Stanley Royd), Wallis's research focus veered decisively to the West Riding's striking pre-occupation with studying the bodies of the sick (p. 8).

As Wallis points out, like other scholarly studies of the asylum in the 1800s, her work concentrates on a single institution: the West Riding (p. 7). Additionally, in common with other works in the history of medicine and psychiatry, it concentrates on one particular malady: General paralysis of the insane or GPI. This was a long-term illness which manifested in a variety of ways including trouble speaking, lurching, false beliefs and loss of strength, and the majority of those diagnosed would never be released from the asylum. For the dedicated researchers of the West Riding, unlocking the truth of GPI was key to

uncovering the connection between the body and mental illness (p. 10), and the brain of the general paralytic patient in particular, was held to be the most profitable object of study (p. 141). This book does not aim to provide a genealogy of GPI as a disease but rather investigates GPI as an aperture into wider discussions about the body and scientific practice at that time (p. 12).

What sets Wallis's work most strikingly apart from other histories of psychiatry is its pioneering approach and structure, set out in the introduction. Methodologically, this study has an interdisciplinary angle; it is informed by 'practice theory' from the history of science which accords importance to the ordinary details of scientific activity (p. 5) and Janelle S. Taylor's concept of "“surfacing the body”" from anthropology (p. 6). The fluidity of the latter idea enables Wallis to fruitfully articulate and analyse her subject matter from a variety of perspectives; the versatility of 'the word "surface" mean[s] that it can denote several things: *giving* a surface to something, a thing *coming* to the surface, or an agent intervening to *bring* something to the surface' (p. 6; emphasis in original). For example, it is a productive way of capturing past medical theories that visible disabilities such as mobility problems were indicative of underlying changes in the brain (p. 74-75). However, it also informs the book's broader historiographic aim to bring into sight scientific practices which have thus far remained hidden (p. 7). This concern with 'surfacing the body in the late nineteenth-century asylum' is, therefore, also assimilated into the book's elegant and original 'anatomical structure' which parallels the sequence of examination of different body parts from the patient's initial entry to the asylum to the pathologist's post-mortem (p. 14). Accordingly, in addition to a requisite introduction and conclusion, this book is comprised of five principal chapters with unusually minimalist titles for an academic work: 'Skin', 'Muscle', 'Bone', 'Brain' and 'Fluid'.

Wallis's sensitivity to the details of separate aspects of the patient's body and their investigation has an anti-generalising virtue; rather than a single grand narrative of the body in the Victorian asylum, multiple medical, social, technological and administrative stories are recovered from the West Riding's past. The chapter 'Skin' elaborates in broadly two directions; firstly, it investigates the practice of medical photography in the nineteenth-century psychiatry and its many functions such as its potential to evidence psychiatry's remedial powers (p. 27-28), and secondly, it probes the way the skin of the asylum patient, often disfigured by scars or blemishes, was viewed as a medium which made manifest a more profound mental or neurological upset. 'Muscle' explores connections between the degeneration of muscle tissue and enfeeblement, in particular the unmanageable physicality of the general paralytic, with the growing interest in cerebral localisation theories as well as contemporaneous ideas that afflicted individuals lacked 'moral' self-discipline (71) and might disrupt societal stability. 'Bone' analyses the explanations attributed to the apparent prevalence of fractured ribs among asylum patients, particularly general paralytics, in the 1870s, and alienists' changing response to this. In 'Brain', the investigation of this organ, through the charting of lesions and the microscopic illumination of the 'spider cell' (p. 141), is described as a particularly potent research focus, albeit one which necessitated new conservation techniques to make the atrophied brain readable. The chapter 'Fluid' investigates how understandings of substances such as an overabundance of Cerebro Spinal Fluid, illuminated by post-mortem, led to changes in understandings of the illness and its treatment, while also addressing the incipient conceptualisation of GP as caused by a toxin. Interspersed throughout the book are arresting greyscale photographs of Wallis's subject matter, such as William T., a patient who suffered from psoriasis, standing undressed and staring at the camera (Fig. 2, p. 36). This book is unquestionably meticulously researched; the chapter summations offered here merely skim the surface of Wallis's impressively detailed

exploration of each aspect of the patient's body and its investigation. Although very lucidly written, like other rigorous scholarly works, on occasion each chapter seems to present slightly more information than can easily be absorbed by the reader. However, this contribution is certainly worth re-reading to fully take in its rich research.

Ultimately, Wallis's comprehensive historical rescue of the minutia of investigations into different aspects of the body rewards the reader's careful attention. In exhaustively considering each bodily part in turn, Wallis achieves a nuanced characterisation of the Victorian asylum's doctors and practices. For example, in the chapter 'Brain', the reader learns that there was much variation within the profession in terms of how evidence was collected and understood. There was an increasing effort from 1870 to standardise the documenting of lesions at post-mortem so that the records of different institutions could be analysed side by side (p. 145-146). However, in practice investigators tended to rely upon contrasting 'classification schemes or terminology' in line with their own preferred conceptualisations and preoccupations (p. 146). A consequence of this was that disagreements occurred between co-workers, as occurred at the West Riding, as information was deciphered in contrasting ways (p. 146). Furthermore, Wallis's historical dissection of each aspect of the body unearths a more varied and expansive range of intentions and attitudes on the part of asylum practitioners than habitually emerges from the historiography. The idea that mental disorder was an affliction of the brain is contextualised in relation to the professional aspirations of the alienist profession (p. 145). Wallis moves beyond a mono-causal explanation, however, stressing that this also proceeded from scientific understanding at the time while also reflecting a much needed hopefulness among the profession about a possible future cure for GPI (p. 145). Elsewhere, in the chapter 'Fluid', Wallis's reveals the ethical and palliative concerns of nineteenth-century alienists surrounding the invasive procedure of 'trepanation' or the 'draining of fluid from the skull' (p. 186), one definite

incidence of which occurred at the West Riding (p. 189). Wallis thus decisively complicates the clichéd depiction of the menacing Victorian alienist undertaking reckless and drastic surgical procedures in the pursuit of a cure. The stark outlook surrounding GPI justified the ‘palliative’ use of ‘trepanation’ to provide short term alleviation of symptoms (p. 191). Moreover, such a course was not undertaken ‘without explicit discussion of their merits, risks, and ethical implications’ (p. 188).

This book is a valuable contribution to a number of overlapping fields; historians of psychiatry and of science, historical geographers and medical humanists will find inspiration in the way this work delves into a dimension of asylumdom underexplored within the literature. Its vivid portrait of the West Riding’s aforementioned scientific, technical and palliative strivings greatly expands historical knowledge of the late nineteenth-century asylum beyond the unvarying generalisation that these were institutions of cruelty and incarceration. Furthermore, its reorientation of the different spaces of the asylum outside of the traditional laboratory as ‘sites’ of scientific investigation is likely to be of particular interest to historical geographers (p. 5). It is also, however, an indispensable resource for historians of science. This book is marked by its encyclopaedic recovery and careful consideration of the epistemologies and technologies of nineteenth-century psychiatric materialism. In refocusing historical attention on the industrious scientific experimentation of research-minded institutions like the West Riding, it demonstrates the unhelpfulness of assessing nineteenth-century physicalist psychiatry in terms of stagnation simply because it failed to produce a cure for mental illness. Ultimately, this work will engage interested scholars at various stages of academia, from undergraduate students and postgraduate researchers to experienced course convenors. Available as an open access resource, Wallis’s scrupulous ‘surfacing’ of the body and scientific exploration in the Victorian asylum is thus within easy reach of its many audiences.

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