

Book Reviews

comprehensively outweighed by the contributions made by this volume.

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Jonathan Sadowsky, *Imperial Bedlam: institutions of madness in colonial southwest Nigeria*, Medicine and Society 10, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, pp. xi, 169, \$45.00 (hardback 0-520-21616-4), \$16.95 (paperback 0-520-21617-2).

This is a slightly unsatisfying book on an excellent subject. The treatment of mental illness in southwestern Nigeria is widely known from the Aro Mental Hospital, opened during the Second World War and conducted between 1954 and 1963 by Dr T A Lambo as an experiment in combining current Western therapies with indigenous practices in a village setting. Dr Sadowsky has had access to the Aro Hospital records, including case files, as well as the archival sources referring both to Aro and to its more conventional predecessor, the Yaba Lunatic Asylum of 1906.

Sadowsky engages with a series of controversies in the history of mental illness, especially in Africa. In a rather slender account of mental care in pre-colonial southwestern Nigeria, he argues that Africans and Europeans of the time shared common views of madness, although not of appropriate institutions for treating it. Turning to the colonial period, he sees psychiatry as both a method of social control and a means of social reform, the tendency towards coercive control being strongest where patients were of low social status and culturally distanced from their doctors, as generally in colonial Africa. He then examines how colonial authorities decided whom to confine, finding that most

were men who caused distress and confusion to those around them, but that—contrary to conventional wisdom at the time—African families were extremely reluctant to consign their relatives to dreaded custodial institutions, instead pressing eagerly for the release even of those who remained ill. Sadowsky's chief interest, however, is to elicit historical insights from patients' statements contained in the Aro Hospital case files, although he insists that such evidence is too exceptional to form the basis for generalizations, as colonial doctors were often tempted to do. Many of the statements quoted are extremely interesting and Sadowsky claims convincingly that they show how the content of insanity was specific to the time and place, but beyond this they give little more than an impression of incoherence.

The problem with the book is that in pursuing these intriguing questions, Sadowsky has neglected to provide a consecutive history either of the Yaba and Aro institutions or of the colonial authorities' approach to the treatment of mental illness. If the Aro records are to be available to other historians, this failure can be remedied. If not, an important opportunity may have been lost.

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Leonard D Smith, 'Cure, comfort and safe custody': public lunatic asylums in early nineteenth-century England, London and New York, Leicester University Press, 1999, pp. ix, 310, illus., £55.00 (0-7185-0094-6).

This book tells the story of public lunatic asylums in the period prior to 1845. While it includes some interesting discussion of subscription asylums founded in this period, its focus is primarily on the early county

asylums, built following the passage of the first County Asylum Act in 1808. Stylistically, it is a relatively traditional account. Smith sees the post-1808 asylum as growing from eighteenth-century charitable models such as St Luke's Hospital in London. He tends to emphasize medical leadership in the asylums' development, and the practical issues of running an asylum.

That is not to say that Smith is theoretically naïve. He has clearly read the more theoretical literature surrounding nineteenth-century asylum provision, but it is not his focus. Thus Smith acknowledges the ambivalent nature of charitable motivations and "progressive" reforms such as non-restraint, but does not dwell on them. Instead, this is a book where the delight is in the detail. The study is based on archival research into a number of these older asylums, primarily Lincoln, Bedford, Norfolk, Nottingham, Gloucester, Lancashire, Staffordshire, and the West Riding. Smith's strength is in weaving an impressive amount of factual information into a coherent narrative as to how early asylums actually worked. Thus while the Poor Law officials in charge of sending people to the asylum are regarded as having parsimonious motives, Smith rather refreshingly also acknowledges the financial concerns of the new asylums. His account of job conditions for servants and keepers melds elegantly into a discussion of the difficulties of these individuals of the non-restraint policy, a policy which left them feeling vulnerable and without recourse to preserve their own safety. Particularly in the early years, the asylum is portrayed as a place of chaos, not order, and Smith nicely identifies the resulting ambiguities between physical authority and brutality which might be exhibited by staff in this period. While never censorious, Smith is equally determined not to paint the past in unduly flattering terms.

This is a survey book, examining the foundation and management of the asylums, the patient populations, the

keepers and attendants hired, treatments and occupations provided, and the rise of non-restraint. The use of local archival documents allows Smith to emphasize the fundamentally local nature of asylum provision. Reflecting the interests of modern social historians, he is able to provide accounts of who the patients were, and convincing accounts of life and variety of treatments offered inside the asylums. This allows an aware, but refreshingly non-judgemental discussion of professional interests and the ambiguities among cure, comfort and safe custody. The sense of the whole is that the old debate between Whiggism and revisionism has been left behind: this book is both and neither.

I would happily recommend this book for university reading lists. Smith's style is clear, and the book provides a very good introduction to the nineteenth-century asylum. This clarity, along with an extremely user-friendly reflection of some of the larger debates in the history of asylums, makes the work appropriate for historians and medical students alike. It further provides a wealth of information and insight for the more advanced researcher.

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Donald Caton, *What a blessing she had chloroform: the medical and social response to the pain of childbirth from 1800 to the present*, London, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. xvi, 288, £20.00 (0-300-07597-9).

Donald Caton is a practising anaesthesiologist, and professor in the departments of both anaesthesiology and obstetrics and gynaecology. During his training, his goal was to teach and practise anaesthesia for obstetric patients, which for him should be the culmination of the art