

The idea of the lunatic asylum, for most of us, conjures up a host of gothic nightmares: high walls, barred windows, desolate interiors crammed with inmates, brutal attendants and uncaring mad doctors presiding over a regime of squalor and scandal, a variety of ingenious restraining devices designed to immobilize, many looking like medieval instruments of torture, an environment characterized by regimentation, mortification, stigmatization and an all-pervading sense of despair – all these in the popular imagination were recurrent features of the empire of asylumdom, that vast assemblage of museums for the collection and confinement of the mad that was constructed by the Victorians to shut up the insane in what purported to be a therapeutic isolation. Here, so one version of their history would have it, was a series of cemeteries for the still-breathing.

And yet at the outset, those who founded such places in the middle decades of the nineteenth century had very different intentions and expectations. "Asylum", after all, originally meant a place of respite, protection and care. The lunatic asylum, said Sir James Paget, Queen Victoria's physician, was "the most blessed manifestation of true civilization" the world had yet seen. Within these walls, said his contemporary John Conolly (widely acknowledged as the patron saint of Victorian psychiatry),

calmness will come; hope will revive; satisfaction will prevail; . . . almost all disposition to meditate mischievous or fatal revenge, or self-destruction, will disappear; . . . cleanliness and decency will be maintained or restored; and despair itself will sometimes be found to give way to cheerfulness or secure tranquility. [This is the place] where humanity, if anywhere on earth, shall reign supreme.

By the 1960s (and indeed for some decades before), it was apparent which version of these competing realities had come to dominate public consciousness. The decades of ideological work designed to persuade the public that mental hospitals were benevolent and therapeutic establishments where sick people were treated by humane and scientifically trained psychiatrists had proved an utter failure. One of the few sociologists to gain some degree of public prominence and respect, the Canadian-American Erving Goffman, spoke scathingly of "hopeless storage dumps trimmed in psychiatric paper". Asylums, he proclaimed in a bestseller of that title, were "total institutions", irredeemably flawed engines of oppression, degradation and misery resembling in all too many respects prisons and concentration camps. Soon enough, politicians jumped on the bandwagon. The then minister of health in the Macmillan government, Enoch Powell, spoke longingly of his desire "to set the torch to the funeral pyre", and he promised that within a generation, the old mental hospitals would be no more.

Unlike many political promises, this one has largely been kept. On both sides of the Atlantic, those suffering from grave and chronic forms of mental illness and misery have indeed been chucked out of the Victorian bins – deinstitutionalized or decarcerated in the jargon of the time – and entrusted to the often less than tender mercies of the community. As a direct consequence, sidewalk psychotics have become a familiar feature of the urban landscape; jails and prisons

Danvers State

ANDREW SCULL

Christopher Payne and
Oliver Sacks

ASYLUM

Inside the closed world of state mental hospitals
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have come to house legions of the mentally disturbed; and euphemistically named "board and care homes" have offered a privatized alternative to the old state mental hospitals, providing a stream of publicly subsidized profits to those willing to speculate in this form of human misery. Malign neglect of the mad has assumed a new guise, but it has scarcely disappeared.

Depopulated and abandoned, the nineteenth-century asylums are rapidly decaying and disappearing. As they do so, they are being enveloped by a wave of nostalgia. Such feelings are provoked, in part, by the dismal failure of our

tals, pockets of human decency, of real life and kindness". Bad as these places were, however, Sacks is convinced that the alternatives were bleaker still. He quotes the consensus among his own patients: "Bronx State is no picnic, but it is infinitely better than starving, freezing on the streets, or being knifed on the Bowery". Yet such fates, to which we have given the Orwellian label "community care", were those to which changes in state policy increasingly consigned them.

Sacks's essay, and a companion piece that follows by Payne, are illustrated by a curious sort of visual propaganda produced by the mental hospitals in their heyday: postcards, in black and white and in colour, portraying the exteriors and interiors of these institutions. Some of these postcards folded out to provide an impressive visual panorama of buildings that could extend a third of a mile and more. Others put on display the farms and the workshops, the dayrooms and gardens that these monumental examples of moral architecture encompassed. And unlike the contemporary photographs by Payne that form the core of

into the distance, sleeping cells to the left and the right in serried ranks, all rigidly symmetrical reminders of the monotony that inevitably characterized institutional life. It is equally manifest in carefully framed portraits of monumental staircases, some composed of rusting iron or rotting wood, others made more durably of marble, all seeming to lead nowhere; in images of windows covered in filth-encrusted wire mesh; of empty coffins and anonymous graveyards; of rotting mattresses and discarded furnishings; of cardboard suitcases and rows of used toothbrushes; of piles of discarded shoes, garishly coloured cushions, and boxes filled with old patient records – the latter once meticulously maintained as part of the pretence that medical treatment was taking place in these establishments, and now revealed to be just so much flotsam and jetsam. The emptiness, the sadness of these ghost towns is brilliantly captured by the photographer's lens.

Payne's book closes with his own reflections on how he first encountered the strange world of the state mental hospital, and the impact that these melancholy decaying piles had on him as he was drawn to study and photograph them. Payne has long had an interest in what he calls "forgotten architecture", and he had previously surveyed the massive hidden machinery that once drove the New York subways and other vanishing aspects of America's industrial landscape. A friend suggested that he should visit Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island, once the largest such facility in the world: "I drove there and was immediately astounded by its size and dumbfounded by its desolation". Overcome by "an overwhelming desire to know more", he began his odyssey, expecting that in light of the dismal reputation these places enjoyed in the court of public opinion, access to photograph them would be difficult to come by. Not at all, though the heightened recent attention to issues of patient privacy helps to explain the complete absence of people in Payne's photographs. He closes with his own reaction to the destruction of one of the first and grandest structures he had photographed. Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts, sold off to developers and torn down, save for a small part of the central façade, to make way for housing for the affluent. Having developed an affection for these abandoned warehouses for the unwanted, Payne views Danvers's destruction with a jaundiced eye. But as it seems that most mental hospitals are likely to share its fate, *Asylum* is of enormous value, as a record of how such places looked in their final years. More than that, and despite its dismal subject matter, it makes for a remarkable and endlessly fascinating book, one that can be recommended with enthusiasm to both the architectural historian and the general reader.



The entrance to Transitional Living Unit, Danvers State Hospital; from the book under review

own attempts to deal with the recalcitrant problems posed by chronic and debilitating forms of mental illness. Lamentations for a world we have lost are fully on display in the introductory essay Oliver Sacks contributes to Christopher Payne's remarkable new book on the closed world of the old state hospitals.

Sacks, of course, is known to most for his elegant essays that rummage through the neurologist's casebook and provide hoi polloi with a glimpse of some of the complexities and fascinations of the realm of nervous disorders. Medical science in his skilled hands becomes a source of tales that seem stranger than fiction. But for a quarter-century before he became a famous author, Sacks worked in a massive state mental hospital in the Bronx, one of the least fashionable boroughs of New York City. By then, he acknowledges, hospitals of this sort had become "bywords for squalor and negligence", a reputation that was generally merited, though he insists that "there were often, even in the worst hospi-

tal book, some of these pictures manage to show patients and attendants, at work and at play. For friends and relatives of the confined, here were reassuring glimpses of the apparently happy denizens of these Potemkin villages.

The prettified images on these postcards contrast starkly with the haunting pictures that fill the remainder of the volume. Payne is a highly skilled photographer, and his camera has captured the rapid and almost total decay that has overtaken the asylum in the aftermath of deinstitutionalization. Gaping holes in roofs, peeling plaster on the walls, crumbling staircases and weed-infested grounds are everywhere on view. The sense of desolation and utter abandonment (a fate that ironically echoes what has become of those who once thronged such spaces and gave them some semblance of life) is overwhelming and everywhere. It is reinforced by a whole series of evocative pictures of double-loaded corridors stretching

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