

## SANCTUARY OR PRISON?

### Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals

Photographs by Christopher Payne, with an essay by Oliver Sacks

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Like many children, I sometimes visited my parents at work. I eagerly anticipated these special excursions. Unlike those of most children, however, these visits occurred at a state mental institution where my stepfather worked for twenty-five years as a clinical psychologist. I recall my first visit as a young teen: I do not remember feeling scared, just curious to meet the patients I had heard so much about. My stepfather made formal introductions as if it were a ceremonious occasion. I met Bob, who thought he was a rabbit. He hopped with his hands up by his face, twitching his nose and eating carrots. Jane was catatonic, wearing a shapeless housedress and rocking back and forth for hours. Another man spoke convincingly about a government conspiracy and aliens. The patients were just as curious about me as I was about them. My stepfather never spoke to them as if they were ill. He listened to their stories and asked questions. He related to each person on his or her own level, no matter how strange it may have seemed to observers. That experience left an indelible mark on me—the fine line between sanity and insanity. In college, years later, I wanted to revisit the asylum to photograph the buildings and grounds, to document their steady descent into decay and ruin. Prohibited by legal bureaucracy, the project was never realized. So it was with great anticipation that I awaited the publication of Christopher Payne's book, *Asylum* (2009).

The book opens with an insightful essay by Oliver Sacks, author of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (1985) and *Awakenings* (1973). Sacks describes the asylum as “a place where one could be both mad and safe” (5) and this was the space my stepfather created for his patients. The essay by Sacks, who worked in a state mental hospital in the Bronx for forty-one years, provides insider context, chronicling life inside state mental institutions in the United States. The original definition of the word “asylum” meant refuge, protection, and sanctuary. As Sacks writes, “Hospitals provided control and protection for patients, both from their own (perhaps suicidal or homicidal) impulses and from the ridicule, isolation, aggression, or abuse so often visited upon them in the outside world” (2). With movies such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, directed by Milos Forman) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999, directed by James Mangold), the word now conjures images of a place reigning in chaos and deviance; a dumping ground for the poor, insane, and/or criminally ill; a place of brutal abuse and barbaric treatments. Sacks reminds us that mental illness should not be romanticized. He describes Payne's photographs of “grandiose, but melancholy architecture” as testaments to the “pain of those with severe mental illness” and a symbol of “humane caring for the less fortunate” (5).

Payne's essay, “The State Mental Hospitals—Their Origin, Construction, and Demise,” presents an historical account of the rise and subsequent fall of the institutions. Noting that the asylums' goals conflicted with the reality of overcrowding, inadequate funding, and lack of successful treatments, Payne's research clearly articulates the reasons for the decline and eventual abandonment of the asylums. Accompanying the text are historic postcards from many of the sites.

Payne spent six years photographing seventy institutions in thirty states. Surprisingly, he did not encounter much resistance in securing permission and permits. He interviewed many administrators and workers who gladly shared the sites' histories. The resulting book includes two hundred beautifully reproduced images. Employing both color and black and white, the large-format photographs capture the monumentality and austerity of the architecture, as well as details of neglect and decay. The photograph of the breezeway to the infirmary ward at Taunton State Hospital in Massachusetts reveals an intact, majestic structure, weathered by peeling paint and broken panes of glass.



Though devoid of human presence, human traces remain in the form of shelves displaying brightly colored patient toothbrushes at Hudson River State Hospital in New York, disheveled patient suitcases at Bolivar State Hospital in Tennessee, stacked dirty dishes in the kitchen of Concord State Hospital in New Hampshire, and men's and women's gym sneakers at Wernersville State Hospital in Pennsylvania. Contrasting the elegiac tone pervading most of the photographs, a single image elicits a small chuckle: a large painted wooden sign held by two scary elves bearing the tidings “Seasons Greetings” at Traverse City State Hospital in Michigan.

Most shocking are the images that depict medical treatment procedures—an electric shock therapy unit from Hastings State Hospital in Nebraska, a hydrotherapy room from Greystone Park State Hospital in New Jersey, an autopsy theater from St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. The book ends with photographs depicting death: a wooden wicker casket and unused grave markers from St. Lawrence State Hospital in New York, coffins in the attic at Fergus Falls State Hospital in Minnesota, a crematorium at Terrell State Hospital in Texas, shelves of unclaimed copper cremation urns at Oregon State Hospital, and a cemetery in Connecticut Valley State Hospital.

The culminating image features a patient's poem painted on a basement wall: “If my heart could speak, I'm sure it would say, I wish I were someplace else today. . . . I wish that some of these people who write the books and make the rules, could spend just a few years walking in our shoes” (201). Payne's book not only documents the vanishing architecture of the asylums, but also encapsulates the social history—its noble intentions and ultimate demise.

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