"Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era," edited by Andrew Scull

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Throughout human history there has been an ongoing problem regarding how to deal with the mentally ill.

Those unfortunates whom society called lunatics or madmen have been beaten, tortured, imprisoned, exiled, killed or just ignored. But it is only during the past two centuries that serious attempts have been made to "cure" them.

One of the first such efforts on a grand scale began in Great Britain during the early years of the 19th century with the construction of large asylums whose aim was more humane treatment of mentally ill persons.

The creation of these asylums, the changes in attitude about the mentally ill and the implications for current policies in England and America are the subject of a new book: "Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era," edited by University of California, San Diego sociologist Andrew Scull.

"The Victorian Age saw the transformation of the madhouse into the asylum into the mental hospital; of the mad-doctor into the alienist into the psychiatrist; and of the madman (or madwoman) into the mental patient," writes Scull, an associate professor of sociology.

Scull and the other contributors to the book note that before the English reform movement, the care of "lunaticks" was generally entrusted to the family, the jailer, the clergyman or the master of the workhouse.

But with the rise of the asylum came the notion that those suffering mental illness should be treated by the medical profession. Thus was born the practice of psychiatry.

But while many in Victorian England-including the early psychiatrists-hailed the lunatic reform movement for its compassion and "scientific" treatment of those with mental disease, other Englishmen were not so sure.

"...Far from believing that the asylum was a therapeutic institution, some contemporary observers noted that 'nearly all among the lower classes look(ed) upon (it) as the Bluebeard's cupboard of the neighborhood," Scull writes. "Even respectable citizens were suspicious of the criteria used to assess madness and sanity, and less than convinced of many alienists probity and capacities."

Scull maintains that the attitudes and controversy over the causes and proper treatment of mental illness have changed little during the past 200 years.

Just as it did during the formative days of the reform movement, the debate continues over the notion of criminal insanity, the value of institutionalizing the mentally ill, how mental illness is defined and what are its causes, and what is the proper "cure," if any.

Scull, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, did his undergraduate work at Oxford University. He earned his doctorate in sociology at Princeton and did post-doctoral work at London University.

A member of the UC San Diego faculty since 1978, Scull has written two other books dealing with how society treats its deviants.

"Decarceration: Community Treatment and the Deviant: A Radical View," was published in 1977 and "Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in 19th Century England," was published in 1979.

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