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Troubled by Faith: Insanity and the Supernatural in the Age of the Asylum

Owen Davies has written widely on the history of witchcraft, magic, ghosts and popular religion. Using archives from asylums in Britain and Ireland in *Troubled by Faith* he considers how the 'old beliefs,' however irrational and impervious to evidence or argument, were dealt with by the emerging profession of psychiatry which was based in the rapidly growing asylums. As one of the dwindling numbers of professionals left who helped to close some of the old asylums, I am always interested in new interpretations of the lives of those who lived and worked in them and Davies' work does not disappoint.

His definition of the supernatural is key to an understanding of his research. He calls it a 'phenomenon or a state of existence seemingly inexplicable in relation to the verifiable material world, or laws of science at any period.' [p.9] A trained archaeologist, he likens his task to that of a forensic excavation. He seeks, with much success in my view, to peel away the layers of popular beliefs in the supernatural, as they are confronted by sceptical scientific professionals who regarded the genre as an embarrassing remnant of a mediaeval age.

The book is in two parts. The first examines the conflicting ways in which psychiatrists interpreted and treated the deeply rooted views of those presenting to them as mad. In the second part he explores the inner lives of residents in hospital using medical case notes from the archives of a number of asylums. He reminds the reader consistently that many people detained in hospital found themselves there for holding views once considered normal but at odds with modern scientific thought. For clarity he uses the term 'psychiatrist' throughout the book rather than the contemporaneous 'alienist' or 'mad doctor.'

Davies asserts that *Troubled by Faith* is a social history of ideas about the supernatural seen through the prism of medical history. It is neither another anti-psychiatry treatise nor a paean to heroic psychiatrists. In his analysis he steers a middle course prepared to criticise the naivete or arrogance of some psychiatrists and to expose incompetents or quacks, whilst praising those dedicated to relieve the distress of those troubled minds in their care. It is to his great credit that he portrays asylum residents with much respect and there are no attempts to describe their troubled lives with humour or ridicule.

Chapter 1 lays the foundations of the book by exploring the nineteenth century psychiatric obsession with witch trials from the previous three hundred years. Many psychiatrists indulged in retrospective diagnoses to bolster the importance of their new profession. He discusses *demonomania*, possession by demons, and shows how the diagnosis was linked to fear, suspicion and misogyny and was often managed by the authorities with torture or execution. He emphasises psychiatrists' belief that the phenomenon could be challenged successfully through logical, scientific argument.

Early nineteenth century psychiatrists were reluctant to accept that supernatural beliefs were still widespread and Chapter 2 considers how supernatural presentations of the time were pathologized. The French psychiatrist, Esquirol, recorded that only a tiny population of the patients he had seen suffered from religious mania. Some critics were highly sceptical of his findings to the point of rudeness and regarded his figures as a gross underestimate.

Davies highlights the nineteenth century debate about whether Catholics and Protestants were more prone to religious insanity. His archival research found how diagnoses varied from one institution to another depending on the particular views of its medical superintendent. He shows how the Catholic Church had developed its own route to tackle demonic possession through exorcism. It led to conflict with the state in countries such as Italy and France whose statutory authorities encouraged removal of sufferers to their new asylums.

Davies describes how Protestant groups such as Quakers, Shakers and Wesleyan Methodists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were criticised by psychiatrists for inducing religious insanity via the overzealous activities of their adherents. He writes of the

‘evangelical super spreaders’ [p.71] whose revivalist roadshows were apparently responsible for increased admissions to asylums of people diagnosed with forms of religious insanity. The First World War brought a revival in belief in the supernatural as bereaved families sought contact with their lost relatives through Spiritualism. Davies declares this a defeat for psychiatry as its practitioners had failed to cope with evidence that the irrational and delusional was an accepted and permanent aspect of the human condition.

In Chapter 3 Davies considers madness and its ‘cures’ in popular medicine in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England and Scotland. He argues that there was a common folk acceptance of what madness was in this period. This is illustrated by such archival descriptions as the woman ‘frightened mad’ [p.99] after seeing a ghost or the excise man made ‘furious and maniacal’ each month at full moon [p.107] He looks at the many myths around the fear of being bitten by a rabid dog which could lead to asylum admission. He argues that curative measures such as eating the dog’s liver were understood and accepted by many. As Davies indicates folk remedies, however unpalatable, were often rooted in classical medicine but much adapted for local usage.

Davies proposes that by the turn of the nineteenth century the asylum was no longer the last option for those showing signs of mental distress. Instead folk medical treatments for mental illness were becoming redundant in the face of cheap and easily available state provision.

Asylum admission had become the first choice in popular culture often to the relief of the person’s exasperated or frightened families and neighbours.

In Chapter 4 Davies analyses the impact of the English court system on the mentally ill during the nineteenth century. He shows how the idea of satanic temptation or satanic instigation to commit crime was gradually dismissed. Detailing a number of court cases, he documents how judges and juries came to accept that a crime could be the result of an aberration of the mind or, as he says, ‘the Devil gives way to delusion.’ [p.45] Prominence is given to the Hadfield trial in 1800 which led directly to the Criminal Lunatics Act of the same year. Sergeant Hadfield was a soldier who received a serious head injury during military service. Inspired by a ‘prophet’ he shot at George III believing the latter’s death would hasten the Second Coming of Christ. He was acquitted on the grounds of insanity and committed to Bethlem Asylum. As the century progressed Davies shows how courts could find the supernatural reasonable without being rational. He argues that whether witches or devils were delusions resulting from insanity became almost irrelevant legally.

Davies seems more comfortable academically in the second part of the book. For Chapters 5 to 7 he has researched in detail casebooks from five asylums in Scotland and northern England and he examines stories of their residents. He views such institutions as extraordinary cultural spaces, places of enchantment, full of individual imaginations and delusions and fears. He maintains that the voices of those who lived there reflected a country undergoing massive social change.

Davies is aware that case notes reflect the prejudices of their medical authors and the religious, social and cultural environments of their age in which they were composed. (I sometimes wonder how my own case notes will be received when they are opened to historians a century after being written.) He shows that the records were compiled in a time of flourishing religious diversity and restructuring, including a greater role for women in organised religion, though the archival notes generally say little about a person’s spiritual affiliations.

Much wider readership of religious works in the nineteenth century was a consequence of the mass production of cheap bibles. Davies observes how doctors were sometimes challenged by patients with an in-depth religious knowledge. He shows how many psychiatrists believed that excessive religious reading was unhealthy mentally. Thus one person was diagnosed with religious excitement and believed he was appointed by God to denounce all evil doers, many of whom were doctors, the worst being the asylum superintendent.

Davies found a rise in examples of messianic divinity in both men and women. In Lancaster Moor Asylum his research identified that there were eight women who between 1865 and 1911 claimed to be the Virgin Mary. Others residents spoke of witnessing angels or seeing Heaven in the sky. He reminds us that soldiers in World War One had similar prophetic visions which were given serious consideration in and, therefore, a certain respectability in newspapers.

Davies argues that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a world with witches, spirits and fairies seemed reasonable to many and in Chapter 6 he shows how these elements affected asylum residents. He indicates that some people in nineteenth century industrial-urban Britain continued to be influenced by the supernatural when contemporary folklorists had long since discounted such beliefs as remnants of an archaic past.

With his own research in Somerset he confirmed the strength of the belief in witchcraft in the county throughout the nineteenth century. He cites the case of a farmer being sentenced to life in the Broadmoor criminal asylum as late as 1916 for shooting dead a woman he believed to be a witch.

From case records Davies has noticed a difference between the cases of those who believed they were bewitched by specific individuals, but were otherwise mentally healthy, and those whose beliefs in witchcraft were commingled with other, sometimes paranoid delusions. The situation was complicated by Spiritualism in which spirits did not represent dead people but those who had 'passed over' and could be contacted via mediums. He also illustrates how some asylum residents presented as being dominated by ghosts of deceased relatives or of spirits which were harder to define and were often malign.

He shows how some asylum residents believed firmly in the fairy world and had detailed knowledge of its hierarchy. They could give vivid descriptions of their appearance and of the mix of good and evil which accompanied fairies.

Chapter 7 takes us to the late nineteenth century world of technological change and its impact on individuals. Davies points out that an age of anxiety had already arrived with the advent of railways. By the 1880s case notes were recording delusions related to more recent inventions such as electric lighting, telephones and the London Underground. He reminds us that concerns and fears about technological innovation had always been a feature of humanity and reflected broader social and cultural changes. The reaction, he argues, was essentially human and, as such, disturbed some people more than others.

He observed that this anxiety was reinforced amongst residents at asylums where psychiatrists practiced hypnosis or used galvanic current from a battery which was thought to increase the blood flow to the brain. Davies uncovers evidence that asylum doctors regarded the use of electricity as beneficial for some patients and he only detected very few cases suggesting asylum staff were using the process to discipline people in their care. Meanwhile in the public realm, newspaper adverts promoted the wondrous healing power of batteries offering to sell them as an essential part of household medicine.

In the brief Epilogue Davies concludes that the asylum movement of the nineteenth century, and psychiatry in general, had failed in achieving its aims of overcoming irrational supernatural beliefs using modern scientific techniques. He finds that the supernatural today is a widely accepted reality arising from the popularity of conspiracy theories and social media. He maintains that the mass media, by determining what stories merit public platforms, has effectively taken over from the medical and legal professions as the agency which shapes public perceptions of what beliefs are insane or not. Despite this he states that the issues which psychiatrists grappled with concerning the supernatural have not gone away but have just taken different forms such as QAnon stories or the presence of 'reptilian overlords.'

Troubled by Faith is a welcome addition to our understanding of the relationship between mental illness and the supernatural within long stay hospitals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a thoroughly researched work giving an indication of the troubled lives of some residents in a context of a rapidly industrialising world. It is an impressive and

fascinating book and scholars of the history of mental ill health will appreciate Davies' arguments and findings.