

Lee-Ann Monk. *Attending Madness: At Work in the Australian Colonial Asylum.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. 280 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-2419-9.



Reviewed by Michael L. Dorn (Stony Brook University)

Published on H-Disability (February, 2011)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Privileging Local Knowledge: The Changing Reputation and Role of the Asylum Attendant in Southeastern Australia

Over the course of the nineteenth century, settlers from Great Britain, living in a ring of colonies that stretched along the coast of the Australian continent, forged a civilization that they recognized as European, God-fearing, and enlightened. Lee-Ann Monk explores an often overlooked episode of Australia's history of civilization: the pacification of the mentally ill and the enforcement of codes of civility, through provision for those thought to have lost or been deprived of their reason. Her monograph, *Attending Madness: At Work in the Colonial Australian Asylum*, is grounded in rich sets of literatures on the Anglo-American asylum, gender history, and postcolonialism. But what sets Monk's account of the Australian colonial asylum apart from previous studies is its attention to labor. Civilization, pacification, rationalization—however you choose to describe it—the incarceration and enforcement of a disciplinary regime on the unreasonable—is first and foremost a product of work. As such, it will be amenable to techniques of labor history.

Because of the conditions of Australia's settlement and the inhospitable character of its desert and bush landscape, its population, rather than dispersing across the continent, became densely concentrated along the coast and primarily in its capital cities. Melbourne in the Port Philip District, designated the capital city for the new Colony of Victoria in 1851, possessed a select and powerful Protestant leadership that was hard-pressed to maintain civility and order as gold was discovered in the surrounding district that same year. The asylum at Yarra Bend, established just north of the city in an effort to demonstrate the colony's self-sufficiency and obviate the need to transport patients to neighboring New South Wales, served as a key crucible in the post-gold-rush, Protestant-led calm-down.^[1] Monk mines rich veins of ethnographic detail from an ever-widening river of paper-reports from superintendents, inspectors, and visitors as well as succeeding select committees and royal commissions established by the Victorian Parlia-

ment in order to inspect and improve conditions at the asylums. Through careful reconstruction, supplemented by letters and newspaper accounts, Monk illuminates the lives of an often-neglected class of laborers—the hospital attendants.

While the attendant in the early years of Yarra Bend was hardly distinguishable from the âkeeperâ or âturnkeyâ at the nearby prison (pp. 24-30), in time, and under pressure from authorities versed in the philosophies of moderate asylum-keeping emerging from Great Britain, there emerged an ethic of care and professionalism amongst the workers. Rather than denigrate these men and women to footnote status as âprecursorsâ to the asylum nurse (pp. 15, 220-221), Monk asks us to consider attendants as a proud and organized labor force that stood their ground against the parade of often inexperienced or incompetent physiciansSuperintendents and junior medical staff—derisively referred to as the boy-doctors (p. 215)—who ostensibly âranâ the archipelago of asylums that opened in Victoria during the 1860s and 1870s.

Because of laborâs concentration in urban areas as well as its racial homogeneity, Australian unions were particularly effective in making its (male) voice heard through the political process[2]—Monk found few examples of women voicing their occupational concerns. As a result, we see in the context of massive institutional expansion a relatively empowered male attendant workforce developing a lay voice in asylum administration to counter superintendentsâ insistence on physician-centered authority. Recognized in the works of British asylum reformers like John Conolly[3] as key actors in the replacement of restraints and custodial care with the new regime of moral therapy and paternal government, attendants were able to stake out a new professional identity that provided them with a sense of job satisfaction as well as some measure of occupational stability. The âgolden ageâ of the asylum attendant in Victoria lasted from approximately 1860 through 1890. Monk concludes the monograph by describing how political activism by physicians as well as economic pressures of the 1890s depression undercut attendant power and led to the rise of mental health nursing.

Monkâs *Attending Madness* is a remarkable story of professional conflict that attests to the uniqueness of the Australian context while at the same time serving as a possible model for further studies of asylum life and work. Over the past year or two, I have had the pleasure

of working as a consultant with two documentary filmmakers whose work traces shifts in societyâs response to âmadnessâ and illuminates the dark, obscure places—often described as retreats or asylums—that are set aside for the âmadâ in the United States and Israel. Both films—their working titles are âKings Parkâ (dir. Lucy Winer) and âJonathanâs Returnâ (dir. Eran Preis)—pick up and examine the shards left behind with the gradual abandonment of centralized state institutions since their peak in size and influence in the mid twentieth century. While Eran Preisâs documentary offers a finely detailed account of one familyâs struggle to come to terms with their sonâs schizophrenia, Lucy Winerâs work âKings Parkâ takes on the more daunting task of pulling together a coherent account of life within one of the largest psychiatric facilities in the world, and the health professionals who supported the institution and now struggle with the varied impacts of its demise.

If, as historian of psychiatry Nancy Tomes suggests, exploration of these legacies in the contemporary landscape can result in renewed interest in the forces that shaped the nineteenth-century birth and growth of the asylum,[4] then perhaps creative works such as Winerâs âKings Parkâ and historical studies like Monkâs *Attending Madness* will inspire a new generation of activist-historians to shake the dust from the reports, inquiries, letters and remnant artifacts that sit in metropolitan and provincial archives, and help give the rest of us a more visceral sense of a complex enterprise whose ruins still surround us and whose legacy continues in contemporary efforts at amelioration and recovery.

Notes

[1]. C. M. H. Clark, âThe Calm-Down Beginsâ in *A History of Australia, Vol. IV: The Earth Abideth For Ever, 1851-1888* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1978), 220-239.

[2]. Gary Cross, âLabour in Settler-State Democracies: Comparative Perspectives on Australia and the US, 1860â1920,â *Labour History* 70 (1996): 1-24.

[3]. John Conolly, *Treatment of the Insane Without Mechanical Restraints*, first published in 1856, with an instruction by Richard Hunter and Ida MacAlpine (Folkestone, England: Dawsonâs of Pall Mall, 1973).

[4]. Nancy Tomes, âThe Anglo-American Asylum in Historical Perspectiveâ in *Location and Stigma: Contem-*

porary Perspectives on Mental Health and Mental Health Unwin Hyman, 1988), 3-20.
Care, ed. Christopher J. Smith and John A. Giggs (Boston:

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Michael L. Dorn. Review of Monk, Lee-Ann, *Attending Madness: At Work in the Australian Colonial Asylum*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26403>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.