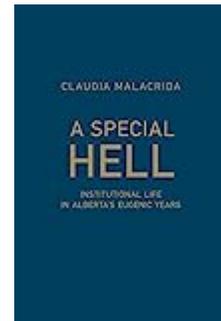




**Claudia Malacrida.** *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta's Eugenic Years.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. xiv + 302 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-2689-8; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4953-8.



**Reviewed by** Dustin Galer (University of Toronto)

**Published on** H-Disability (January, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

In twentieth-century Alberta, Canada, âmentally defectiveâ children and adults were victimized by the logic of institutionalized confinement and segregation. Disproportionate numbers of poor, rural, immigrant, indigenous, or MÃ©tis people labeled with intellectual disabilities were routinely channeled into the Michener Centre in Red Deer, a total institution where involuntary sterilization, forced labor, violence, and abuse were commonplace. Supported by a body politic condoning eugenics and the strict separation and control of people with physical and intellectual disabilities, the provincial education system regularly supplied the Michener Centre with new inmates while local businesses and homes in Red Deer benefited from their unpaid inmate labor. Justified by policymakers, medical officials, administrators, and community members as a site of remedial educationâa place of last resort for people considered useless to societyâthe center was a place where inmates were instead physically and emotionally traumatized, having been entirely stripped of their rights, personal autonomy, and dignity.

In *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta's Eugenic Years*, Claudia Malacrida asks why this was allowed to happen and how it affected those who lived and worked the âinstitutional life.â Over a decade in the making, the book was produced with the assistance of

graduate students and the Alberta Association of Community Living, with Malacrida, professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge, bringing an extensive research background on disability, motherhood, and eugenics in Alberta, including development of the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada.[1] Interviews with twenty-two institutional survivors, former workers, and family members are combined with close scrutiny of government records, media reports, and a deep reading of institutional records. The book systematically breaks down the ideas and historical realities that gave birth to total institutions for âmentally defectiveâ people, highlighting the traumatizing impact on generations of inmates torn from their families and communities and subjected to routine abuses. The true strength of *A Special Hell* is in the strong authorial stance and careful interweaving of interview and archival data, contrasting insights from human experience against the cold facts of printed records.

The book draws conclusions about the broader state of institutional care for âmentally defectiveâ children and adults in Alberta but, given the nature of the sources used, focuses specifically on the Michener Centre in Red Deer. The Michener Centre had its beginnings in the early 1920s in a converted building known as the Provin-

cial Training School that accommodated shell-shocked Great War veterans. The center originally housed 108 inmates in a single building; its population peaked in the 1960s with around 2,400 inmates occupying sixty-six buildings on 130 hectares of land. Resident children were provided little education that ensured their reintegration into the community and by the 1950s were unceremoniously transferred at age eighteen to the adult long-term section of the campus. Malacrida argues that involuntary sterilization and "passive eugenics," described as the institutionalized segregation of inmates from the rest of society and in-house policy of strict gender segregation, were at the heart of the institution. While rehabilitation and education were part of the founding philosophy, these services were rarely delivered in practice. Inmates were expected to pay for their care and accommodation through their personal resources and labor with administrators taking steps to appropriate any belongings and family wealth to ensure the costs of care were covered.

Malacrida finds several underlying influences motivating the institutionalization of "mental defectives." The growth of compulsory public schooling in the early twentieth century brought more children with intellectual disabilities to the attention of authorities, and, although education legitimated the existence of the institution, much of what counted as education was unpaid labor. Another factor included the growth of the professions, specifically the professionalization of medical superintendence, specialized nursing, and caregiving, which combined to support the categorization and care of children identified as being "mentally defective." Finally, members of the provincial Eugenics Board were active supporters of the center, holding their meetings and mental hygiene clinics there. The "success" of institutionalization made involuntary sterilization seem more attractive as a relatively low-cost alternative to lifelong institutionalization which conformed with the overall goals of an evolving eugenics movement. Malacrida found the socially and politically conservative environment in Alberta meant that the pace of departure from these ideas was somewhat slower than across the rest of North America, attested to in the fact that the center remains open today given a lack of community-based alternatives and strong support from parents and employee groups.

Malacrida strongly contends that "eugenic sensibilities" motivated the selection of candidates for institutional segregation at Michener. Population characteristics of Michener residents reflected broader moral panic regarding women's sexuality as well as poor, indigenous, and immigrant communities. Malacrida demon-

strates how schools made it easier to identify "problem children" based on their appearance, behavior, and performance, and some children were selected for Michener not due to intellectual disability but through poor behavior or other observations by school officials. For example, single parents were often convinced by educators and social workers that life would be better for all involved parties if their "mentally defective" or "problem" child was sent to Michener. Interviewee stories of admission were "almost cinematic in their darkness" a black car driven by strangers pulling up to a dusty farmhouse, long silent drives arriving at the massive red brick administration building; all with little to no explanation to children what was to happen a profoundly traumatic experience followed by, in some cases, up to a year of separation from their family (p. 47). Once admitted, children were stripped of their possessions, including clothing, robbing them of their identities and forcing them into a new institutional role. By the 1950s, there was a greater focus on lifelong "containment" rather than short-term periods of training and rehabilitation (p. 41). Tragically, despite the diverse circumstances of individual inmates, the principal underlying reason for admission was that local communities and their schools could not or would not accommodate them (p. 46). It was not until the 1970s, when deinstitutionalization and the community living movement began to chip away at community (and thus political) support of large residential institutions, resulting in the gradual shift in resources back to short-term stays.

Malacrida describes a dehumanizing life at Michener where inmates were deprived their freedom of movement, thought, time, or choice. Feeding, housing, and cleaning were activities conducted en masse and without regard to individual preferences or dignity. Malacrida recorded one former support worker: "She was unable to recall anyone spending their working days in the day rooms [where inmates literally spent the entire day]; indeed, when I asked her about the day rooms, she was unable to recall much more than that her job was to put those patients who were deemed capable into the [locked] day room and leave them there until they needed feeding or toileting again" (p. 66).

Routine and extraordinary violence between inmates and staff and among inmates, both spontaneous and institutionally sanctioned, was a part of life at Michener. Injuries occurred from neglect and intentional harm, including both physical and verbal abuse. The center kept records of incidents of injuries that appear to have no causation, and no recommendations so as to avoid future incidents. The result was an environment of con-

stant alertness to avoid being victimized by violence perpetrated by others. Senior staff would evaluate and intimidate younger staff, pressuring them to participate in a culture of violence against inmates (p. 98). Malacrida explains that "the everyday brutality of institutional life made things that in other contexts would seem extraordinarily violent instead seem quite ordinary" (p. 104). "Side rooms" or "time out rooms" were spaces used by staff to control unruly inmates and intimidate all inmates into compliance, imposing seclusion and segregation to reinforce desired behaviors and punish undesired behaviors (pp. 110-111). Inmates were typically stripped naked and left in these rooms for a few hours, for days, or in one case, for life. Malacrida reports some evidence that inmates resisted this institutional regime that confined and controlled them. She uses a liberal definition of "resistance," including internal narratives of self-control and self-determination that may have been invisible to others. These passive forms of resistance were more common than overt methods due to the oppressive nature of life at Michener. Resistance included refusal to be fed, escape and attempted escape, and suicide.

One of the primary reasons for legitimating internment in institutions was access to education not available in the public school system; however, this was a promise not delivered at Michener. Indeed, children were not provided with any meaningful education but were instead subjected to regimens of "training" that amounted to economic exploitation (p. 132). The stated goal of this special education was to enable their return to the community, but as the focus shifted to long-term care there was decreased emphasis on reintegration-focused training. The fact that few children ever achieved independence and community reintegration should have been surprising given Michener's stated goals. A six-room schoolhouse was finally built in 1952, but difficulties in offering adequate qualified instruction persisted. The line between occupational, vocational, and academic training was blurred and deeply flawed. Inmates were "both burdens and resources" in their inability to fully participate in the capitalist system, but they generated employment for their caretakers and, still possessing the capacity for productive, commodified work, for themselves (p. 151). Malacrida argues that inmates provided "unacknowledged labour" in the guise of vocational training that subsidized the operation of the institution.

Besides education, one of the principal reasons parents were convinced that they should agree to institutionalize their children was access to expert medical care.

However, the quality of medical care was "deeply problematic." Bedsores were a commonly reported condition, and suggest a possible indication of neglect; there was no discussion of preventive or remedial procedures, such as physiotherapy or passive movement exercises. Dental care was particularly problematic as both letters of complaint from parents and dental records attest. There were an extraordinary number of dental extractions, leaving many inmates without teeth "not necessarily for reasons of hygiene or decay but to facilitate care and reduce staff and inmate injuries from bites" (p. 180). Much of the food prepared was "purged," because, as one former worker recounted, most of the inmates did not have any teeth—a situation that further compromised the overall health of inmates and presented increased risk of choking. Inmates were also routinely overmedicated and lived in a "trance-like state" throughout much of the day, a situation that enabled staff and physicians greater social control over the patient population (pp. 185-186).

In the 1950s and 1960s, under the tenure of a new medical director, Dr. Leonard Jan Le Vann (1915-87), the population exploded from 293 to 2,400 inmates, coinciding with the introduction of medical testing on patients in conjunction with the University of Alberta (p. 189). Le Vann is depicted as a deeply ambitious man who misrepresented himself professionally as a psychiatrist, publishing the results of his dubious research on patients in leading academic journals and inviting dignitaries and professional associations to Michener, likely for his own self-aggrandizement. Malacrida details the context and mechanics of the eugenic program in Alberta and at Michener, including the realities of "significant and sustained state-sanctioned abuse" in the form of long-term internment in residential institutions (p. 222). The 1995 case of *Muir v. Alberta* ended with a former patient, Leilani Muir, being awarded over 250,000 Canadian dollars for "wrongful sterilization," acknowledging the wrongful internment of Muir but avoiding a challenge to the logic of institutionalization as a form of "passive sterilization" (p. 222).

*A Special Hell* was a difficult read, not due to common problems with academic writing, such as complex prose or theoretical framing, but because of the sheer weight of the subject matter presented in horrifying detail. On more than one occasion, I was forced to put the book down to limit the volume of material digested at a sitting and avoid significant emotional disturbance. Harrowing stories of individual experiences of abuse, neglect, and pain are even more disturbing considering these represent generations of similar untold narratives. Fortu-

nately, there is a growing body of work dedicated to exploring experiences of institutionalization, for example, the superlative online resource Eugenics Archive which documents survivor narratives and challenges the modern resurgence in support of eugenics practices.[2] These stories need to be told in order to avoid repeating mistakes of the past, including continuing regressive atti-

tudes that serve to stigmatize and segregate people with physical and intellectual disabilities.

#### Notes

[1]. See <http://eugenicsnewgenics.com/>.

[2]. See <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/>.

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

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

**Citation:** Dustin Galer. Review of Malacrida, Claudia, *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta's Eugenic Years*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44792>



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