



Hysteria: The disturbing history

By Andrew Scull

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The nineteenth century seems to have been full of hysterical women - or so they were diagnosed. Where are they now? The very disease no longer exists. In this fascinating account, Andrew Scull tells the story of Hysteria - an illness that disappeared not through medical endeavour, but through growing understanding and cultural change. More generally, it raises the question of how diseases are framed, and how conceptions of a disease change through history.

The lurid history of hysteria makes fascinating reading. Charcot's clinics showed off flamboyantly 'hysterical' patients taking on sexualized poses, and among the visiting professionals was one Sigmund Freud. Scull discusses the origins of the idea of hysteria, the development of a neurological approach by John Sydenham and others, hysteria as a fashionable condition, and its growth from the 17th century. Some regarded it as a peculiarly English malady, 'the natural concomitant of England's greater civilization and refinement'. Women were the majority of patients, and the illness became associated with female biology, resulting in some gruesome 'treatments'. Charcot and Freud were key practitioners defining the nature of the illness. But curiously, the illness seemed to swap gender during the First World War when male hysterics frequently suffering from shell shock were also subjected to brutal 'treatments'. Subsequently, the 'disease' declined and eventually disappeared, at least in professional circles, though attenuated elements remain, reclassified for instance as post-traumatic stress disorder.

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Editorial Review

Review

Review from previous edition: "Elegantly constructed book...Skull is otherwise exemplary on the whole historical curve."

--George Rousseau, TLS 20.08.10

"The stories they tell are often fascinating and alarming - pitched somewhere between farce, genius, horror and a lab report."

--The Scotsman 23/10/2009

"These four 'biographies' of diseases go far beyond questions of biology or medical practice; they talk politics, sex and class, faith."

--The Scotsman 23/10/2009

"The notion of an ailment having a birth, a lifespan, and - ideally - a demise...is an illuminating and useful concept."

--Wendy Moore, British Medical Journal 31/10/2009

"Andrew Scull's exploration...provides an utterly enthralling study of medical ideology and sociology."

--Wendy Moore, British Medical Journal 31/10/2009

"Should be required reading for all students of medicine."

--Wendy Moore, British Medical Journal 31/10/2009

About the Author

Andrew Scull has held faculty positions at the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and the University of California, where he is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Science Studies. He is a past president of the Society for the Social History of Medicine, and has held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. He is the author or editor of more than twenty books, many of them on the history of psychiatry in Britain and the United States. He has lectured on five continents, as well as making many media appearances on programmes dealing with mental health issues.

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