

*Peter Shea, Defining Madness, Institute of Criminology Monograph Series No 12, Hawkins Press, Sydney (1999), ISBN 1 876067 12 8*

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Dr Shea has justifiably earned respect as one of Sydney's leading intellectuals, and as a profound thinker on matters theological, philosophical, jurisprudential, and neurological. His latest effort warrants respect as a serious piece of historical research. There ought to be a Peter Shea carrel in the Mitchell Library. Bob Carr and John Howard, who are currently beating up the need for more and better history teaching in schools, should give Peter Shea a prize for 'Defining Madness', because what might otherwise have been a dry rendition, from 1788, of the legislators' chorus, is in fact a fascinating history of local institutions, the medical and legal professions, and politics from the moment when Governor Phillip arrived, and the land was pronounced uninhabited.

The book works on a variety of levels. Anyone who was anyone, or anyone who is anyone, will want, before settling down and reading the book from cover to cover - and even though its essential bones are very dry, the book is a quick and easy read - to flick through first to see whether they, or anyone they know, or anyone from whom they might be descended, gets a mention. Are any descendants of Captain Hindman - who on 1 August 1843 was arrested at the racecourse for creating a disturbance, and who ended up at Tarban Creek Asylum - alive and well in Sydney? And what is Ernie Page doing these days? Some, like Laurie Brereton, have moved on to other things. Others, like Frank Walker, are doing other things, but retain an involvement in the ongoing mental health debate.

As to Tarban Creek, well, it has an ironic resonance for me. One of the remaining bits of Gladesville Hospital is still sitting down there on its banks, with the mozzies and rats as visitors, and it's in that cramped and inaccessible setting that the Mental Health Review Tribunal continues to conduct its difficult and complex business. Ironic? A different form of asylum has recently sprung up around the Tribunal, spreading down from Victoria Road to the banks. This one is for members of the grey army with a marble fetish.

The book has been attractively type-set and printed by Federation Press, an outfit which, like Peter Shea, deserves a medal for its contribution to the medico-legal intellectual life of New South Wales. It's well presented and reasonably well proof-read. Its got the two 'nn's in Dennis, but there's an apostrophe 's' in Down Syndrome. Of course, it's the substance that is important, and the substance of the book is multi-layered.

Dr Shea has a unique ability to intellectualise law and psychiatry, in a way which continues to stimulate medical students and law students, enabling them to move from nuts and bolts mechanics to a theoretical plane which puts their day-to-day, and otherwise potentially mundane activity, into a broader philosophical context. Trainee psychiatrists lucky enough to work with Dr Shea at the Kestrel Unit of Morisset Hospital, a high security unit mainly for previously very dangerous forensic patients, this being one of his wide range of eclectic posts and activities, receive a key to enhanced levels of satisfaction and achievement from their long-term professional pursuits. Readers of 'Defining Madness' will derive a similar sense of intellectual satisfaction from the way in which Dr Shea discusses certain states of being in which individuals can find themselves, which writers, barbers, surgeons, witch-doctors, asylum superintendents, and currently, people who can lawfully be called psychiatrists, have over the centuries, been described as a 'lunatick', as 'insanity', or as 'mental illness'.

On another level, the book is an interesting historical treatise on a branch of public administration in New South Wales, namely, from before the building of the first asylum at Castle Hill in 1811 by Governor Macquarie, through to an era of economic rationalism when most of the old infrastructure has been pulled down, with prisons being erected instead. On yet another level, the book provides a fascinating historical account of the 'constantly shifting socio-political framework' against which the ongoing debate about the appropriate shape and scope of mental health law has raged over three centuries in New South Wales. And on yet another level again, for the political scientist, and for ordinary citizens, who would like to think that their politicians and parliaments know what they are talking about, and know what they are doing, the book shows how when change is mooted - and this resonates for every aspect of government's attempts to regulate the human condition, not just for the condition of being given a diagnosis of mental illness - the processes involved can lack transparency, can become mired in interdepartmental feuding, can be corroded through backroom political manoeuvring, and can be distorted by minor lobby groups, or by the prejudice or ignorance of individual politicians with axes to grind.

For health administrators, the book provides an excellent historical account of the organisation of psychiatric services in New South Wales, from before there were any, through to the post-deinstitutionalisation (or should it be, non-institutionalisation) era.

But finally, the book excels in its principal purpose, namely, to provide a lucid and accessible reference for everyone in the community who needs to understand and be able to apply the legal criteria for civil commitment to involuntary treatment for mental illness in New South Wales, and whose minds are open to profitable infusion from an historical perspective aimed at illuminating what is happening now by what happened before.

Those grateful for Dr Shea's work will include carers, consumers of mental health services, mental health lawyers, doctors and administrators.

Having praised the book to the skies, I close with a vague note of concern. Is Dr Shea about to jump ship, and join the bizarre Rozenman Camp, whose activities are described in the last chapter? There is the religion which prefers 'guardianship' to 'rights' for people with mental illness. Now is not the occasion to rejoin the debate. But Peter, the evidence is all around you.

**Dr Robert Hayes**

Barrister, and former President of the Mental Health Review Tribunal