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Peter Barham, *Outrageous Reason: Madness & Race in Britain & Empire, 1780–2020*.  
 Monmouth: PCCS Books, 2023.  
 Reviewed by Mark Lee

Investigating the history of psychiatry can often unsettle our own ‘common sense’ on matters of mental health and illness. Reason and madness, we quickly learn, are not stable categories, but are shaped amid social contingencies and political agendas, frequently to the empowerment of some and the marginalization of others. This insight is brought home with a fresh—and disturbing—poignancy in Peter Barham’s *Outrageous Reason: Madness & Race in Britain & Empire, 1780–2020*. Like his earlier work, the book showcases Barham’s keen perspective as both a chartered psychologist and trained historian, delivering a highly original, and profoundly challenging, critique of a colonial legacy, which, he compellingly argues, remains discernible within British mental health services—and wider societal perceptions of mental health and illness—today. It will make an important contribution to the libraries of academics and clinicians, while also remaining accessible to the lay reader.

The central argument of the book is that modern British psychiatry emerged not as an objective mind science, but as an ideological and institutional tool that has been used to bolster and enforce white, liberal conceptions of reason and mental health, and hence, to pathologize other groups and identities—in particular, non-whites, women, and the poor. Systemic racism, Barham contends, persists within psychiatric institutions and practices today, an issue that demands an unflinching reckoning with psychiatry’s colonial past. And so, through a series of case studies spanning more than two centuries, Barham explores the interplay of colonial agendas, racist ideologies, and institutional abuses that have attended and vitiated the modern psychiatric enterprise from the start.

Barham sets the stage for the study by exploring some of the key epistemological issues surrounding madness and diagnosis. Mental health patients endure a ‘credibility deficit’, with doubt being cast on the truth and reliability of their own words. Ironically, though, the category used to discredit patients, mental illness, itself lacks scientific credibility, grounded as it is in the values and biases of psychiatric authorities. The book thus aims to pull back the curtain on psychiatric knowledge and the racial hierarchies and colonial interests that have constituted it historically.

The first and most substantial section of the book examines interrelationships between slavery, madness, and psychiatry in Jamaican history. Barham’s central claim here is that the emancipation of enslaved people across the British Empire in 1834 was an incomplete process. Denied the status of political subjects, freed slaves were instead subjected to an economic and moral tutelage which cast them as commodities within the colonial system. Colonial violence persisted, then, as a feature of white rule over a black population that was vilified as being lazy, unruly, and incapable of self-government; and it played out not just in military engagements, such

as the vicious British response to the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, but also in the incarceration and brutal treatment of Jamaicans in the colony's mental institutions. The horrors of the middle passage were ritualised, Barham observes, in punitive measures such as 'tanking', in which patients were repeatedly dunked and held under water in a bathing tank. Despite these abuses, Jamaicans exercised agency in various ways. The voices of patients were heard, for instance, in a major colonial inquiry into conditions at the Kingston Lunatic Asylum. (Chapter 3 focuses on the powerful testimony of Henrietta Dawson, in particular.) And with the emergence of the Revival movement in the late nineteenth century and Rastafarianism in the early twentieth (the focus of chapter 5), Jamaicans carved out measures of both intellectual and economic independence from the colonial system—efforts that were, however, met with psychiatric reprisal when leaders of these movements such as Alexander Bedward and Leonard Percival Howell were labelled insane and confined.

The remaining four sections of the book comprise two chapters each, beginning with a pair that examine the racialization of the lower orders in Britain—the so-called 'poor whites' who were pathologized for social conditions that made them, from the perspective of their supposed superiors, a threat to the purity and superiority of the white race. Barham then shifts the focus to the ways in which psychological theories have been used not just to justify and enforce imperialism, but also to critique it. This section features one of the book's most intriguing case studies, in which Barham uses psychoanalytical insights to highlight the ways in which the Canadian colonial administrator R.R. Racey's erratic behaviours and psychological breakdown in the early twentieth century expose the inherent violence and contradictions within colonial rule. It is not just the colonised, but also the colonisers, who sustain psychological traumas, as Racey's experience suggests. Next, the book explores echoes of the colonial enterprise in the experiences of Jamaican-born immigrants in Britain, with case studies in the early 1980s exposing racial discrimination—and the persistence of associations between blackness and irrationality—within British law enforcement and mental health services. Highlighting comparable cases in more recent history, the book's final section calls for systemic change via a thorough reckoning with how British institutions—not least, psychiatry—have been shaped by white, liberal ideologies.

This is an ambitious book in scale, dealing, by necessity, more episodically than granularly with its disturbing subject matter. Yet Barham's skill as a historian is evident throughout, not least in his careful articulation of how psychiatric discourses and practices are constructed within, and respond to, broader social and political environments. Equally impressive is the psychological insight and empathy with which Barham writes. Indeed, to the extent that it is possible, one comes away feeling as if they have had an encounter with the book's protagonists, and to have understood something of what they suffered, or to have glimpsed an alternative 'symbolic order' to which some of them pointed. In the latter respect, the book has an emphatically hopeful message that rewards a careful read—a vision of a more collaborative future in which madness has been 'rescu[ed] . . . from the isolating discourse of mental illness' and can be viewed afresh against 'a horizon that enjoins relational theories of what it means to be "human"' (p. 213).

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