

**SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
IN HISTORY**

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN HISTORY

By

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To Marty, Chris, and Kelly

PREFACE

This book was written to provide an overview of major historical contexts and to describe how historical occurrences shaped the nature of disabilities. It introduces the reader to the topic of the social history of people with disabilities and provides basic background information on disability in prior centuries. It presents major notions for understanding general social trends regarding people with disabilities. The book provides an overview of some of the major trends that directly influenced people with disabilities. It was written to increase our knowledge and consciousness of presentations of people with disabilities and to fuel further inquiries on the topic. Many of our contemporary images and ideas about people with disabilities cannot be applied to people with disabilities who lived in earlier times. Other images and ideas can be traced back to earlier ideas about the nature of disabilities and the people who have them. It has been my hope to present the rich texture of presentation regarding disability from earlier times in such a way that images of people with disabilities are more meaningful to people with disabilities, scholars, and other readers of this book.

It provides a general survey of how people with disabilities were perceived in western history. It draws on art, literature, and historical information from earlier times. The span of time selected for study focuses on the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The period of the Middle Ages was selected because it represents a watershed of ideas regarding people with disabilities and significant changes in artistic representations of all people, including people with disabilities. In prior centuries individuals were relatively insignificant and artistic images were relatively sterile. The church exercised so much control over art and literature, that individuality found little representation. The Middle Ages represents a period of change in both artistic techniques and attitudes toward people with disabilities. It was at the close

of the Middle Ages that artists and authors began to portray the individual characteristics of people with disabilities. During the Middle Ages artists began to present detailed and individualistic characteristics of their human subjects. The late Middle Ages gave rise to the use of perspective, as human subjects began to be presented in natural contexts. The thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries saw increased effort to depict subjects as individuals and as they actually appeared (Hofstatter, 1968). People with disabilities were included in this shift but stereotypes and traditions continued to influence the manner in which artists and authors represented them. The Middle Ages also represent an interesting time regarding the social interpretations and relationships between people with disabilities and those without, although many people acquired disabilities during the life span.

When the Middle Ages came to a close and the Renaissance flowered, a new orientation on life developed. Life in this world took on a new importance. The focus on the individual that emerged with the Renaissance brought attention to people and their characteristics. Some of the humanist focus brought about by the Renaissance also affected notions and images of people with disabilities. As societies turned toward understanding humankind, a natural curiosity grew about people with disabilities. People with disabilities increasingly became the subject of art and literature. Art during the Renaissance and particularly that of the later northern Renaissance sheds much light on how people with disabilities were perceived and treated by their respective societies. The centuries that followed the Middle Ages and Renaissance were characterized by accelerated social change and social upheaval, which in turn caused dramatic changes in many perceptions about people with disabilities.

The study ends with the nineteenth century for several reasons. First, the nineteenth century represents century of great importance to people with disabilities. This was the century of Darwinism and major scientific breakthroughs that changed some of the paradigms used to interpret the nature of disabilities. This was the century that led to many reforms in the care and treatment of people with disabilities. It was the century that fostered some of the stereotypes about people with disabilities that have only recently been challenged in contemporary society. The study's scope does not continue through the twentieth century because there already exists a considerable body of information about people with disabilities during the twentieth century.

The twentieth century is one in which considerable legislative, medical, and legal materials are available. While the twentieth century is undoubtedly an important one, it needs to be addressed as a separate topic.

Some historians and scholars may take issue with the broad scope of this work, suggesting that significant details and subtleties will be lost in a book covering the Middle Ages and ending in the nineteenth century. They may also argue that each region, with its unique traditions and culture, or each of the periods or centuries encompassed in this book deserves intensive, thorough coverage in a separate volume. All of these points have merit but this work is not intended to be a detailed or period specific piece but an introduction to some of the basic presentations of people with disabilities over the centuries. Only by studying presentations and images of people with disabilities over such a lengthy period is it possible to determine whether these views and presentations were short-term or lasting. No other work presents such a broad social overview on which more detailed studies can be based. While there are many excellent texts on specific disabilities, works that cover a broad range are absent. This study is meant to be a survey of the social landscape and a catalyst for further research.

Although this book might, in the eyes of some, represent a sizable effort at covering the topic of disability, it in no way fully covers the topic. Nor does the book represent all of the experiences that people with disabilities have had over the centuries. Rather it, to borrow a cliché, only scratches the surface. Anyone who decides to study the topic should be prepared for great voids in information. Hopefully this study helps fill some of the previous voids.

HERBERT C. COVEY

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