INTRODUCTION: 
THE EMERGENT CRITICAL HISTORY OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, and Tim Stainton

In 1861, as the concept of ‘idiocy’, and authority over those designated ‘idiots’, was in the process of being transported into the medical sphere, the English physicians Martin Duncan and M. B. Lond lamented that ‘The terms used in the literature of idiocy complicate the first steps of practical inquiry greatly, and different writers, regardless of the necessity for unanimity, use the same words to describe various classes of idiots’. The fluid terminology that worried Duncan, Lond, and their peers has often appeared as both an obstacle to understanding idiocy (and related concepts), and as an indication of its universality. Edouard Séguin opens his 1846 *Traitement Moral, Hygiène et Éducation des Idiots* with a multi-linguistic and cross-cultural list of synonyms for ‘idiocy’, and his implication was clear: if everyone has a word for it – or indeed, many words – then ‘idiocy’ must be a universal condition that crosses time and culture. But at the same time, the slipperiness of the key terms noted by Duncan and Lond might equally point to an accompanying slipperiness of the concept itself, as well as to the struggles of medical and other professionals in the nascent ‘idiocy’ industry as they sought to define the object of their attention.

Anyone exploring the history, or pre-history, of intellectual disability is faced immediately with a question similar to that which frustrated Duncan and Lond: what does the term ‘intellectual disability’ or, for that matter, ‘learning disability’ refer to? And what, glancing further back in time, of idiocy? Or folly? We can assume a smooth transhistorical continuity in which one term substitutes for another, but there is another possibility, one supported by critical historical research: that intellectual disability and related concepts are products of and contingent upon specific social and intellectual environments, and perform specific functions within those environments. The questions then become ‘How and why do these concepts form? How do they connect with
one another? Under what historical circumstances might these connections have taken place?’ The objective of this collection is to explore and expand the question of how and why the category of ‘intellectual disability’ was defined or, to use the slightly more loaded term, ‘constructed’. The disciplinary range covered in this collection – legal, educational, literary, religious, philosophical, and psychiatric histories among others – was not chosen so that sources could be easily filleted for references to some trans-historical human type, but so that each might inform a specifically modern concept, intellectual disability, from their own *sui generis* perspective as forces which shaped definitions and responses at various points in time and place. In so choosing, however, we do not neglect the consequences of these defining forces for the actual people encircled by the shifting definitional field, and who contribute a further perspective to this volume.

In putting together this collection, we seek to chart a course between the Scylla of assuming a trans-historical subject, whose definition was gradually revealed over time to emerge as the modern-day ‘person with an intellectual disability’, and the Charybdis of extreme post-modern constructionism which ultimately dissolves into a fog of isolated contingencies. There is a connection between the early modern and the modern intellectually disabled subject; but the nature of that connection, however, is not readily defined or discerned. We can say what it is not: it is not one simply of terminology, underdeveloped ontological understanding, or epistemological refinement. And what is clearer is that the historical treatment of the subject requires certain considerations in order for that connection to emerge as free from retrospective taint as possible. This introductory chapter will review some of the key areas of contention in delineating the role and relationship of history to the present-day subject and will set out the broad organizing principles for this volume.

**The challenges of language and terminology**

If, as we argue, there is no definitive trans-historical concept of intellectual disability, then it is no surprise that language used to describe it is remarkably unstable, even in this age of presumptive certainty that ‘we know what intellectual disability is’. This very volume could easily be marketed to the same audience under at least three different labels (intellectual disability, developmental disability, and – in the UK at least – learning disability). Anne Digby, in discussing the choice to use the terminology of the historical period under study, notes that its multiplicity has confused the subject matter, and that both political correctness and the desire to reduce stigma associated with terminology has accelerated the rate of terminological change. While not
inaccurate, this observation seems to imply the kind of historical continuity of the subject which has plagued much of the scholarship in the area and does not fully address the implications of that multiplicity. Rather than confusing the subject matter, the plethora of terms is, in part, the subject matter, and certainly the starting-point for research. Understanding their meaning in context, their roots and implications, and the social forces which brought them to this association is a critical site for historical inquiry. Is ‘political correctness’ the only or primary reason for changing terminology? To what extent can we posit an essential core underlying the labels used, or does this shifting sand in fact imply the lack of any essential core? These questions do not have simple or singular answers.

On one level the most concrete problem is that, in many cases, terms assumed to directly mirror contemporary ‘intellectual disability’ in fact do not do so, or least not in a linear fashion. The philosopher John Locke, for example, author of some of the founding texts of modern psychology, used at least four different terms which have been presumed to reference intellectual disability. Locke used ‘idiot’ when describing the purely intellectual realm of the human understanding (the ability to ‘abstract’) and its absence; on the other hand, when he was discussing natural history and species difference, he used ‘changeling’. He also used ‘fools’ or ‘naturals’ (an abbreviation for ‘natural fools’) interchangeably with both, though possibly referring only to the ‘lower’ end of that category. ‘Idiots’ would have likely covered a broader group than the one we would today consider as persons with intellectual disabilities, and would also have encompassed the uneducated and uncultured (one of the earlier definitions of the term). In his differentiation between madness and idiocy, Locke situates ‘idiots’ apart from the mentally ill and alongside ‘brutes’, the general category for animals, which ‘abstract not’.

While clearly there is some overlap, we cannot assume a direct correlation either among these terms or to our modern subject: Locke’s idiot is not the same as his changeling, and neither can be equated with a person labelled as intellectually disabled today. But, critically, these usages can tell us much about the process of constructing the subject as well as the broader social positioning. The term ‘brute’, for instance, recalls the longstanding association of intellectual disability with non-human animals. Indeed Locke directly suggests that ‘changelings’ represent an interstitial species: ‘Here every body will be ready to ask, if Changelings may be supposed something between Man and Beast, “Pray what are they?” I answer, Changelings, which is as good a Word to signify something different from the signification of Man or Beast’. Changeling’ itself has a long and complex history reaching well beyond an association with anything remotely related to intellectual disability, ranging
from children with physical disabilities, to Christian nonconformists, to Jews. A good example of this comes from the interpretation of Luther’s *Table Talk*, a standard reference-point where he suggests that a ‘changeling’ child be drowned because he is a ‘mass of flesh’ having no soul. This has led the period to be seen as the worst in history for people with an intellectual disability. On closer examination, however, it is not clear that this was an intellectually disabled child as we would recognize one today; it is also unclear whether the story itself is even Luther’s.

While complete misassociations are rare, uncritical assumptions that these terms represent a trans-historical subject persist, most notably in the recent craze for retrospective diagnosis of the ‘Mozart had Asperger’s’ or ‘caveman had autism’ variety (in Ch. 8 this question is addressed briefly, as the writers discuss the possibility – and its potential relevance – that ‘Peter the Wild Boy’ had Pitt Hopkins Syndrome). This is not to suggest that the trisomy 21 associated with Down’s Syndrome, for instance, did not exist prior to the actual discovery of the chromosomal variation. We merely warn against jumping to the conclusion that it would have placed you in any of the categories suggested by the above historical labels at any given point in time, or that having the physical appearance of such a chromosomal variation would have meant the same thing as it does today in terms of social position, recognition or responses. What this means for historians is not that there is a complete lack of association between terms, but that we must treat them as signifiers that are highly contingent and context-dependent. Indeed, language is a critical site of historical inquiry that can tell us much about the nature of the subject and the forces constructing it, as well as the contemporary social responses to it.

On a more contemporary front, to dismiss the rapidly changing terminology as simple ‘political correctness’ misses the more critical point of language as a site of struggle and identity – similar to what we have seen in the civil rights movement (negro, black, African American, person of colour, etc) or the women’s movement (girls, ladies, women, wymyn, wimmin, etc); such a simple dismissal also ignores the continued instability of the concept itself. It is not insignificant that the movement of people currently bearing the various labels and who advocate for recognition of their rights has chosen to reject the label altogether, and to replace it with ‘People First’. This is a recognition of the fact that there is no essential subject in social terms, and also of the more politically relevant position that it does not matter why or how you came to be excluded or marginalized: it is the marginalization itself which defines you as ‘other’.

The notion of othering is also useful in understanding the approach we propose here. As Digby notes, ‘Implicit in the language used to describe these
individuals is the notion of the Other'. Clearly there was a both an implicit as well as often an explicit purpose to label and define people as ‘not like us’. The example from Locke is perhaps most explicit in taking this so far as to tie the description to an interstitial species difference that forms a stable item in natural history (though even he suggests that category definitions are ultimately arbitrary). But if we accept this notion of othering, then does it not imply that to understand the nature of the other we must understand those doing the othering and their context? And if the independent variable in the equation is the dominant actor, then surely there is also great scope for mission creep. In other words, there is a risk that categories used to identify anyone ‘not like us’ may have a broader scope than what the term may imply on first reading. As discussed above, ‘changeling’ was applied at different points in history to a broad range of persons ‘not like us’. A more recent example can be drawn from the first wave of eugenics, when ‘women of loose morals’, indigenous people, and immigrants often found themselves classified as part of the feebleminded or idiot class. We cannot understand the category without understanding the social and cultural circumstance of those doing the classifying; thus, understanding the ‘history of intellectual disability’ requires not an understanding of the march of science so much as an investigation of changing socio-cultural contexts. This applies equally to the present as to the past, and as such implies in addition a different future for how we conceptualize and respond to people currently categorized as ‘intellectually disabled’.

**Intellectual disability and historiography**

Our topic has received comparatively little attention from historians and the humanities in general. But in recent years there has been, if not a torrent of historical treatments of intellectual disability, at least a steady stream. For many years, the standard works on the history of intellectual or learning disability were those by by Leo Kanner and Richard Scheerenberger, which charted the ‘progress’ in definition and services and implicitly assumed a trans-historical intellectually disabled subject that has gradually been revealed through scientific progress. But since the early 1990s there has been a shift from these Whiggish histories, or in Noll and Trent’s words ‘achievement histories’, to works exploring the social, cultural, and intellectual history of idiocy, learning disability, intellectual disability, and related concepts. Not coincidentally, the appearance of these new histories has been paralleled by shifts in the social position of people identified as having intellectual or learning disabilities. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the closure of many long-term institutions, with formerly segregated people being moved (with varying degrees of integration)
into community-based settings. At the same time, People First and other grassroots self-advocacy groups of people labeled as having learning or intellectual disabilities have sought to make heard the voices of the profoundly marginalized, and while these groups may have little mainstream political impact, they have gained some small measure of recognition within the disability community and the professions engaged with that community.

A first wave of critical histories – primarily social, institutional, and policy histories – appeared in the mid-1990s, with James Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (1994), Philip Ferguson’s *Abandoned to Their Fate* (1994), Steven Noll’s *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst* (1995), and Wright and Digby’s collection *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency* (1996). These works suggested new ways of approaching the idea of intellectual disability, analysing the forces that gave shape to the notion and engaging with questions of the status of people identified as idiots according to their sociocultural environment.

Fundamental to Trent’s thesis is the Foucauldian notion that ‘care’ is a central tool of ‘control’, and he argues that ‘mental retardation is a construction whose changing meaning is shaped both by individuals who initiate and administer policies, programs and practices, and by the social context to which these individuals are responding’. Drawing on the examples of ‘madhouse’ histories such as those by Roy Porter and Andrew Scull, Trent tracks the early asylum movement in the US, from Samuel Gridley Howe and Edouard Séguin through to the ‘normalization’ movement and the deinstitutionalization advocacy of the late twentieth century, focusing primarily on the means by which a professional medical and scientific class sought to assert control over people identified as ‘feeble-minded’ in order to cement its own authority.

Trent’s work was not alone in focusing on the US, with his study being published at roughly the same time as Ferguson’s history of the American institutionalization movement, which focused on the Rome State Custodial Asylum for Unteachable Idiots (later the Rome Developmental Center) as its prime exemplar, and Noll’s analysis of the development of the eugenic agenda within institutions in the southern US from 1900 to 1940, which explored the influence of class, race, and gender in determining who would be incarcerated and, further, who would be subjected to eugenic procedures, notably sterilization. Of these three works focusing on the institutionalization of people labeled as ‘idiots’ or ‘feebleminded’, Trent casts the widest net, surveying 150 years of institutionalization in America, and is the most assertive in arguing the socially constructed aspects of ‘feeble-mindedness’. Noll and Trent also edited a collection of essays, *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, reaching back to the mid-nineteenth century but with most contributions being institutional or policy histories focusing on twentieth-
century issues of eugenics, segregation, education, and policy development; some contributions, however, explored the ideological and cultural construction of intellectual disability.\textsuperscript{13}

Across the Atlantic, Wright and Digby’s 1996 collection explored the place of learning disability in the UK, with contributions representing social, legal, institutional and intellectual histories from the medieval period to the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{14} This broad-ranging collection – necessarily more eclectic than a single-author monograph – can be credited with opening even further avenues of research into the idea of learning disability or intellectual disability (terms which in UK usage are roughly synonymous). In her introduction to the collection, Digby expressed the hope that the book would ‘stimulate further studies into the history of these individuals’,\textsuperscript{15} and in the five years following its publication, three of its contributors published their own book-length studies: Mathew Thomson’s \textit{The Problem of Mental Deficiency} (1998), Mark Jackson’s \textit{The Borderland of Imbecility} (2000), and David Wright’s \textit{Mental Disability in Victorian England} (2001).\textsuperscript{16} Thomson examines the development and application of mental deficiency laws in the UK from 1913 to the 1946 National Service Health Act; the bulk of his analysis focuses on policy development, and of the forces acting on it, with an emphasis on the work of the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded and the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act that came out of the Commission’s recommendations. In tracking the relations of these laws to movements in political theory, health care, and eugenics, Thomson argues that ‘to understand why the problem of mental deficiency has become acute by the early twentieth century we need to go beyond an explanation which rests on the eugenic threat posed by the feeble-minded, to consider how this fear interacted with anxieties about regulating the boundaries of responsible citizenship and managing an increasingly sophisticated network of welfare institutions’.\textsuperscript{17}

Jackson’s history of the creation of the liminal category of the feeble-minded focuses on Mary Dendy’s Sandlebridge schools and her related writings to explore how this group was presented as a threat to the health of the nation; he argues that ‘late Victorian and Edwardian conceptions of [feeble-mindedness] and its boundaries were clearly fabricated under the influence of profound, predominantly middle-class, anxieties about race, class, criminality, and sexuality’ that were ‘reconfigured through the window of contemporary biological explanations of mental deficiency’.\textsuperscript{18}

Meanwhile, Wright delved into the Earlswood archives to present a comprehensive institutional story of the Royal Earlswood Asylum from its mid-nineteenth-century foundation to the end of the century, touching on the policies and practices that characterized the first large British institution for
people identified as ‘idiots’ from the 1840s to the end of the nineteenth century. While this work focuses specifically on institutions and their operations, Thomson and Jackson are more particularly concerned with the creation of a new group, the ‘feeble-minded’, lying on what Jackson identifies as ‘the borderland of imbecility’. Thus they investigate social forces – notably anxieties around urban poverty, moral degeneracy, and ethnic and race relations shaping these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century categories – with the deeper aim of showing how these intersect with medical and scientific discourses and result in the formation of a new group of outcast undesirables who could be controlled through segregation (Jackson) and social policy (Thomson).

More recent studies have undertaken a critical interrogation of the concept itself, exploring less the question of ‘how the intellectually disabled were treated and/or managed’, and moving beyond the immediate social forces and towards how the concept was formed and took shape. These histories analyse the cultural discourses and intellectual currents that helped give shape to intellectual disability; further, they investigate the symbolic labour performed by the idea of idiocy: that is, they ask what people mean when they refer to idiocy or intellectual or learning disability, and they ask why these concepts assume significance in a particular historical time and place, whether this significance is expressed within a cultural product or a social event.

The first book-length cultural study of idiocy, Martin Halliwell’s Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film (2004), explores the use of ‘idiot’ characters in novels and in films based on these novels, focusing on ‘the way in which idiot figures have been constructed to propel narratives in a particular direction or to act as a counterpoint to other characters’; however, Halliwell’s work is not a history, and further is limited by his choice not to explore the idea of idiocy beyond the parameters of these cultural products, and by his implicit assumption of a trans-historical materiality to idiocy.

Two of the editors of the present collection have also published books engaged with tracking the history of ideas of intellectual disability, both arguing that the concept, and its various precursor concepts, are given shape and meaning by their historical context, connecting these notions to the social and intellectual tensions of their specific time and place. Patrick McDonagh’s Idiocy: A Cultural History (2008) takes an explicitly historical approach in exploring the discursive and symbolic function of the ‘idiot’ figure in cultural products – primarily plays, poems, and novels, from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century – in order to illuminate more fully the symbolic labour performed by the image of the idiot in other discourses – legal, theological, scientific, and medical – and to use this evidence to track the historical and ideological development of the idea of idiocy.
INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENT CRITICAL HISTORY

Chris Goodey’s *A History of Intelligence and ‘Intellectual Disability’: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (2011) further demonstrates that the history of intellectual disability is also the history of intelligence, and is interwoven with a wide range of other histories across disciplines, including legal, theological, philosophical, and aesthetic discourses. Goodey’s research, focusing on Europe from the late medieval period to the early eighteenth century, argues that ideas of intelligence developed in a bid for social authority and status in competition with other status modes, those of the ‘honour’ and ‘grace’ societies; in this formulation, the ‘idiot’, as the outsider group enabling the creation of a society characterized by ‘intelligence’, stands in direct relation to the ‘vulgar’ and the ‘reprobate’ – the outsider groups that helped define the ‘honour’ and ‘grace’ societies, respectively.

Gerald O’Brien’s *Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era* (2013) looks at the different metaphors – including the moron as animal, as pathogen, and as enemy force – used to give shape to the idea of the ‘moron’ in the US in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Murray K. Simpson’s *Modernity and the Appearance of Idiocy: Intellectual Disability as a Regime of Truth* (2014) presents a Foucauldian ‘archaeology of intellectual disability’, exploring the intellectual discourses shaping ideas of intellectual disability from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment through the development of Édouard Séguin’s pedogogy in the nineteenth century, the medicalization of idiocy and classification of its different types, and the creation of idiocy as a problem of development: all of these function as means towards a kind of ‘conceptual exclusion’ that isolates idiocy as an objective phenomenon. Simpson’s analysis argues that idiocy is a ‘discursive contingency’ that is symptomatic of contemporary anxieties rather than a constant and transhistorical state of being.

Most recently, Irina Metzler’s *Fools and Idiots? Cognitive Disability in the Middle Ages* (2016) marks the first book-length exploration of the idea of cognitive disability in the medieval period. This work in particular demonstrates historians’ increasing recognition of the significance of ideas of idiocy to the trajectory of other, more mainstream narratives – philosophical, theological, and educational, rather than purely medical or scientific. It is in this burgeoning context that the history of the idea of intellectual disability and related notions, while still sparsely represented in the catalogues, is making its presence and importance felt.
Why we need a conceptual history of intellectual disability

In the gradual emergence of this critical history, and particularly one that targets conceptual foundations, a wide range of disciplines has become relevant: the history of medicine, literary and cultural history, social history, legal history, the history of religion, the history of education, and latterly (with the closure of the institutions) oral history. A tension remains between the history of medicine and those other disciplines, however, inasmuch as residual notions of a trans-historical subject linger on in them. Under ‘medicine’ come too psychiatry and psychology, often operating in its name and drawing from it a scientific cachet. Professionals in these latter fields were once well represented on the list of authors who have written histories of intellectual disability, including Kanner and Scheerenberger, and they must be distinguished from professional historians whose area of interest just happens to be the history of psychology. Offsetting such quasi-medical professional motives, however, which might be seen as favouring the scientific or ‘medical model’ of a trans-historical subject, there has also been a high incidence of authorial motives that spring from a direct, non-professional knowledge of people with intellectual disabilities, either as family members or as advocates. This latter motive tends to be ‘biased’, if one may use such a term, in a different direction, towards asserting the full humanity of the people thus labelled – though such is the contradictoriness of our topic that neither motive necessarily excludes the other.

Disability studies, meanwhile, starts off from its direct opposition to that medical model, and some of the recent work cited above would claim disability history rather than the history of medicine as its reference-point. Of course this discipline is more sophisticated than we have space to discuss, but a parallel problem occurs here too. To put it crudely, disability studies tends to take the ontological status of ‘impairment’ more or less for granted. Grounded as the discipline is in studies of physical and sensory conditions, it sees ‘disability’ as the social consequence of an underlying natural impairment.

Two different, though not entirely contradictory, possibilities ensue. Many people before the modern era, and some people still, have taken physical or sensory impairment as external signs of an impaired intellect. The classic reference here is the person whose partner or friend is asked ‘Does she take sugar?’ Consequently, in response to this calumny, the ‘social model’ retains space for a tacit belief that some intellectually disabled nature does indeed truly exist: that there are people whose real essence constitutes the thing which people with physical and sensory impairments are not, and which they vehemently deny being. Equally, though, the social model retains space for the fact that
across history a missing limb is always a missing limb; hence physical disability contains some sort of ‘natural’ bedrock through which critical analysis probably cannot penetrate, and this contrasts with the fundamental lack of historical stability or conceptual permanence in intellectual disability – thus raising the question whether the latter can be considered to have any such natural bedrock.

In short, is intellectual disability an impairment at all? The sheer range of primary conceptual sources and their dislocated character, evident from research in our field and in the chapters presented here, is a pointer to the thought that, in the long historical sweep, it is not. The obvious demur would be that despite this historical and conceptual shape-shifting, some actual people at this present moment are lacking in certain specific abilities that everyone else takes for granted as a mode of their social functioning. And of course that is true. All academic sophistication aside, it is no good denying it or one might create a situation where it seems a good idea to ditch people’s social supports along with their labels. However, while this objection may confirm something as a disability in the ‘social model’ sense (i.e. it is forms of social organisation that create discrimination and the very need for support), the nature of any notionally trans-historical ‘impairment’ beneath it remains unclear.

Consequently, while both history of medicine and disability studies have given rise to work on our topic that is both critical and sound, we venture to suggest that for the purposes of future research some additional disciplinary reference-points are necessary.

First of all, it seems obvious that one avenue through which the history of intellectual disability should be pursued is intellectual history. This is a discipline whose various schools (there is also ‘history of ideas’ and ‘conceptual history’) research large ideas not ahistorically but in the context of specific historical cultures and actors. It asks: what questions were men and women of a particular time asking of each other, how did they perceive each other, and what do their conceptual and theoretical apparatuses owe to this? Moreover, it tends to specialize in the early modern era, from late medieval to Enlightenment, with which this present volume too is concerned, and this means that it engages inevitably and especially with something historically specific, namely the emerging concepts and centrality of a secular human reason, of intelligence and intellectual ability. The study of the corresponding disability surely has some vital connection to this. Yet the ‘reason’ on which intellectual history has focused consists mainly of philosophical, political, and economic ideas. It tends to leave knowledge of the psychological kind out of the frame, perhaps partly convinced by the latter’s characteristic claim to be a
'hard' science by association with biology. And it has touched only in passing on our topic: for example, by tracing forwards from the classical era the theory of 'natural slavery', in which intellectual inferiority is inseparable from political subordination.27

This might be seen as an avoidance tactic, in psychoanalytic terms a 'resistance': would one really want to expose oneself to the kind of evidence from intellectual disability which might detract from the intellectual ability that is the foundation of one's own discipline and its assumptions? If so, then something similar applies to a discipline like the history of the human sciences, which ought to be particularly receptive to our topic and in which psychology does indeed form one strand. As its leading critical authorities point out (and as routine accounts of the history of psychology do not), the subject and the object of study here are made of the same primary materials as each other. The mind studies the mind. And if even physics has a notorious subject-object problem (in quantum physics both the object and the instruments measuring it consist of quantum systems), so much the more problematic must it be in psychology, whose constituents are not even material ones. It is especially necessary and especially difficult, therefore, to ‘look at it “from outside”’.28

Neither intellectual history nor the history of the human sciences is simply a lens through which a particular historical culture observes some primary conceptual entity that otherwise has a permanent and natural existence; rather, the conceptual entity is also itself the lens. The critical study of such a core consistent as intelligence and its absence should surely form part of intellectual history and contribute to it.

Secondly, it ought not to be necessary to add that another avenue through which the history of intellectual disability must be pursued is history, as a discipline with its own theories and methodologies that have to be respected. Its leading theorists have insisted that, rather than rush immediately to ‘what happened in the past’ and thereby risk only holding it up as a static and distorted mirror to the present, the historian should recognize before even setting out that the relationship is a dynamic one. R. G. Collingwood famously pointed out that each past era has had its ‘absolute presuppositions’ which, though unfamiliar to us now, were once beyond question and which there had been a prior and unwitting decision to believe. These presuppositions constitute, so to speak, the metaphysics of the particular era. The historian’s job is to get round the back of them. Collingwood also said that doing so makes it easier to get round the back of our own.29 The dynamic element consists in a living tension between past and present, in which ‘without historical knowledge of the beliefs held about the nature of being human, we are ignorant of what it is to be human’.30 And so one question vital to the historian in our field, at the
outset of their research, is as follows: What, in the absolute presuppositions of past eras about the essence of what it is to be human, occupied the key position which cognitive-type intellectual ability occupies today, and by what concrete historical processes did the former become the latter?

Also called for is the appropriate historical methodology: a modicum of something akin to scientific method. For example, it is standard practice in the history of medicine to cross-check the label a primary source has for some bodily disease against the symptoms or characteristics which are attached to it in that same source. This is all the more crucial for intellectual disability, in view of psychology’s subject-object problem. As indicated above, when the source contains a label such as ‘mental defective’ or ‘feeble-minded’, or earlier ‘idiot’ or ‘imbecile’, or earlier still ‘innocent’ or ‘natural fool’ (or indeed Latin and other foreign-language equivalents, whose translation introduces yet further chances of semantic slippage), the same procedure needs to be followed. In setting down to work, then, another vital question will be: Do the specific descriptive characteristics with which the adjacent context defines that label correspond with the characteristics which define today’s ‘intellectually disabled’ people? The cognitive criteria of the latter can be found in any current textbook and are very specific indeed.

If they do not, and if all possible alternative meanings are not researched first, then modern criteria will travel back through time to slip cosily and ghostlike into the vacant slot. And when this happens, it may have something to do with the absolute presuppositions of our own that result from both the (relatively recent) sacralized social status of intelligence and its seemingly indispensable place in the mutual recognition and self-esteem of individuals. Collingwood’s dictum implies moreover that the further away in time the presuppositions are, the stranger they will seem to the twenty-first-century eye, and therefore the more difficult to interpret or even detect. In addition, in the special case of intellectual disability, the further away they are, the greater too the degree of cultural variety there will be even across one and the same period. This is yet another contrast with today’s outlook which is monolithic, and derives from the Baconian or Kantian idea of a universal human history with a universal human reason or intellectual ability at its core.

Finally, in noting and recommending the emergence of a distinctively ‘conceptual’ approach to historiography, we cannot leave it floating freely above the hard realities of social existence. As Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, neither social history nor conceptual history are singular branches of the discipline as are (say) economic history, diplomatic history, or church history. Rather they constitute, in tandem, a general claim, ‘so to speak, an anthropological claim’, that encompasses all special histories. Researchers confronted
with the plethora, ambiguity and, at times, sheer contradictoriness of labels and concepts in our particular field will grasp the salience of this, and the correspondingly restricted ‘specialness’ of medical or disability history. Yet the social-conceptual relationship itself is not straightforward. Transformations over the course of social history occur at a different rate from those occurring in conceptual history, and the ‘structures of repetition’ in each are likewise mutually distinguishable. The terminology of social history remains dependent on the history of concepts because it needs to access ‘linguistically stored experience’, while conceptual history remains dependent on social history because it has to keep an eye on the ‘unbridgeable difference between vanished reality and its linguistic evidence’. All this plays havoc with periodisation, as we shall see. The problem is that while labels and concepts in psychology are unstable by comparison with the facts of social history, their respective timescales are different and connected.

From the middle ages to the great confinement

We have suggested above the possible extension of scholarly research as far as certain disciplines that are already intrinsic or adjacent to our subject matter, rather than into social theory in general. Without them, ‘theory’ itself, even in its most radical forms, would be ill-equipped to stand fully outside our absolute presuppositions about people who, being socially invisible, are largely invisible to theory too.

That is not to argue against the importance of theory. Michel Foucault’s identification of ‘the great confinement’ (le grand enfermement) has shaped much research into the history of ‘unreason’, and while we would certainly employ caveats to our use of this phrase, it remains relevant to the conceptual history of intellectual disability. Foucault himself had nothing to say about intellectual disability as such, and in comparison with the broad historical sweep implied in his use of le grand enfermement, in the history of intellectual disability it refers to a specific moment: the onset of the long-stay hospital institutions in the last third of the nineteenth century. Of course, with intellectual disability, as with mental illness, the majority of people affected always remained in the wider community or at least in the family home, not in the institutions. Nevertheless, the image of confinement remains central: the institutions did in fact sweep into a more or less single remit a range of human conditions, and drew their inmates from community and family situations whose immediate causes cannot easily be categorized.

In so doing, they helped to create the climate of labelling in which the modern (albeit, as always, provisional) definition – the conceptual confinement
– of intellectual disability arose. Although physicians were centrally involved in the creation of the first long-stay institutions and continued to be so, others, such as psychiatrist Wilhelm Griesinger and the polymath statistician and psychologist Francis Galton, were soon visiting, and from their preoccupations would inevitably come a sharper delineation of categories that reciprocally reinforced their own ‘mind-science’ specialisms. The combined medical model that ensued finally removed the organic identity of individuals and imposed its own upon them, stealing from them who they were and dictating who they would become.

That is why we stop in the mid-nineteenth century, with the onset of the institutions. The relative abruptness of our end-point helps to highlight the historical contingency of what would subsequently be presented to the public as a scientific category. Moreover, for scholarly purposes, the decisiveness of that break opens out whole fields of enquiry prior to 1850. Instead of hunting down pre-modern examples of modern intellectual disability, one enquires instead across all pre-modern forms of ‘othering’ and beyond for the conceptual ingredients that would go into the creation of intellectual disability as a specifically modern concept. And this sets new conditions for historical research, since the most widely read and discussed research work thus far has focused chiefly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; as we have said, the conceptual pre-history is much less well known. Could this very choice and limitation of subject matter confine the intellects of potential historians, or at least block our field of vision? The more critical of the studies we discussed at the outset recognize intellectual disability’s cultural contexts. Yet it is a step considerably further to suggest that it is a cultural category at its very root, rather than a natural kind. And that, as the articles in this volume show, is what is proved to be the case once the pre-modern field, along with its terms of enquiry, is opened out.

At the same time, that very breadth of field poses a more difficult problem: where to start. Periodisation is always a notoriously difficult task. Any year zero for our topic would be purely notional. But we can say with some assurance that going back much further would have finally rendered this collection incoherent, and made it impossible to have psychology’s state-of-the-art term ‘intellectual disability’ in the title. Let us suppose some notional point in the far distant past where there was no such thing. At what point did the concept come about? Is it not arbitrary to begin as we do with the late medieval era? As Irina Metzler’s chapter in this volume shows, apposite resonances, in a restricted sense, appear in primary source texts earlier than that; one can begin to detect them at the height of the Roman Empire, and with the start of Christianity. In the philosophy of that period, it is possible to find descriptions of what look
like modern ‘intellectual’ deficiencies if not in a discrete type, then attached to sensory impairment, to blind and deaf people. Disconcertingly for the historian, though, people labelled ‘fool’ or ‘innocent’, familiar though the labels as such may look, tend not to be defined by deficiencies of that particular sort. And this continues to be the case well into the sixteenth century.

It is not an easy chronological ride, then. What we can say, however, is that the late medieval era was witnessing a huge expansion in the social administration of church and state (‘Empire’ in its broadest sense), and with this came the rise of a written bureaucratic culture among the literati. Thus our collection starts with the sightings of a modern concept among a precise social caste which specialized in the writing and application of the law or had been educated accordingly. As Brian Stock’s seminal work on the history of literacy demonstrates, in the late middle ages idiota was the term for a broad sector of the population: the illiterate in general (if only illiterate in Latin, knowledge of which was what the term literatus indicated), or simply an ordinary lay person who, even if able to read, was unversed in a particular profession; in ecclesiastical contexts, idiota referred to a novitiate.

This semantic matrix survived well into the seventeenth century. Yet alongside it, within the professional niche of the literati, alarm bells had already begun to ring. What if that broadly interpreted idiota were spotted within the sphere (however demographically restricted) of property inheritance, or of an education system whose function was to form the administrative elite doing the classifying? There, the non-expert status was more evidently problematic. Even so, if in this one label out of many we have discovered forward connections and the beginnings of a ‘shaping’ role for the modern profile of intellectual disability, nevertheless its presence in legal theory was not understood at all clearly even then – not even by practising lawyers, as Wendy Turner’s chapter in this volume illustrates.

Its eventually crucial historical role thus originated from what has rightly been called ‘a strange place’, one that was at the time esoteric. Important as property law may have been to late medieval socio-economic functioning, this restricted kind of idiot did not yet have a central position in broad cultural discourses, since today’s universally dominant idea of a general, species-specific human intelligence had still to acquire its now sacred status. Nevertheless, from that point on, an unbroken line can start to be traced (on which medicine for a long time remains in the rearguard) – a line that would lead one day to the embodiment of deficiency concepts in a human or, more often, sub-human type.
Overview of chapters

We begin this collection, accordingly, with Wendy Turner’s investigation of medieval responses to ‘intellectual disability’, which supplies the appropriate vantage-point for seeing how an existing set of labels (idiota, fatuus, stupidus etc) started to become relevant to the courts. The skills of perception, cogitation, and memory were needed to learn and act appropriately in a social environment – albeit one restricted by membership to an elite class (to the other social classes these labels might apply across the board). Lawyers and clerical experts who had studied at the first universities would have learned about such mental operations in their theological and philosophical studies of the soul and intellect; they then used them for practical administrative purposes, in the bureaucracy needed to cope with the burgeoning feudal property system. Officials challenged individuals who seemed unable to cope with their landholding obligations and material goods. New laws based on primogeniture imposed a greater need to distinguish permanent incapacity from temporary mental illness. As in modern tests for head injury, they tested people on everyday things they should be familiar with, such as counting money. The main dividing line across the spectrum of abilities thus focused on whether people could handle their social responsibilities. It leaves us to wonder, was their deficiency some natural condition recognized first in jurisprudence, or a predominantly social construct that first begins to be invented there, at a specific Western historical conjuncture?

Irina Metzler deals with education, starting from a standard categorization within medieval thought that separated the reasoning faculty from the will – a division whose themes still pervade subdisciplines such as educational psychology. ‘Will-nots’, as the name suggests, were able but reluctant to learn, or obstreperous enough to willfully sabotage their learning objectives. Following clues in the Roman writer Quintilian, she describes how this aspect of medieval educational theory surfaces particularly in that widely studied teaching manual, the Didascalicon of the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St Victor. Making more detailed differential analyses of learning ability than before, in a context where the important areas of study were theology and philosophy, Hugh, like most other writers, assumed that disabilities were malleable and improvable. The more important problem for him was the distinction between people regarded as not wanting to learn something and people incapable of doing so despite perhaps wanting to, between ‘pretend fool’ and ‘genuine fool’. Metzler discusses also the beginnings of a greater concern with what would later become the mind-body problem, through the relationship between physical physiognomy and difficulties with learning.
Janina Dillig looks at how these ideas and practices were reflected in literature. Using the legend of Parsifal as her central reference, Dillig demonstrates medieval ideas of what it meant to be a fool in a literary context, and shows how that literature embraces an entire range of concepts regarding ‘intellectual disability’ which have in common only how much they differ from modern ideas about the intellect. These examples of fools in medieval literature, by no means a complete list, nevertheless exhibit the sheer variety of depictions prior to foolishness becoming a popular literary theme from the sixteenth century onwards. Above all, foolishness was not simply contrasted with reason as we now understand it. On the contrary, it could indicate sainthood or mere innocence (where the primary discourse was about sin rather than reason), or a simple lack of knowledge or awareness of social mores. Moreover, these were also the basis for comical situations in which foolishness could be greeted with or without malice; these were contextually related to the court jester, whose occupation represented the socially acceptable form of the will fool. On the widest cultural kind of evidence then, that of fictional literature, medieval discourses on intellectual disability cannot be reduced to one type, but can be seen to have interacted with each other.

Taking us into the early modern era, Chris Goodey directs our attention to some of the dominant actors, those doing the classifying of people. In his focused reading of a debate from the 1650s, he describes how sections of the church, faced with the social, political, and denominational chaos of the English civil wars and revolution, developed an obsession with the formal, codified assessment of human types. The church catechism was the diagnostic manual by which a pastor would assess the understandings of his flock and grant them access to holy communion, or, conversely, deny it. In the latter case, driven by circumstance and the dialectic of religious dispute, a novel type of ‘idiocy’ was singled out that differed from madness inasmuch as it was permanent and promised no lucid intervals, and differed from the ‘reprobation’ of sinners and hypocrites inasmuch as idiocy was not willful as theirs was. ‘Idiots’, then, marked a category that should be excused but not included. In this sense they were direct precursors of those pathological minority ‘idiots’ who by the nineteenth century would be featuring in a modern science of the mind, as a stage on the almost seamless journey from elimination by excommunication to elimination by pre-natal testing, and from the catechism to the IQ test.

Turning to literary articulations of intelligence and ‘defects of the mind’, Chris Gabbard explores the fourth and final section of Jonathan Swift’s 1726 satire Gulliver’s Travels, in which Lemuel Gulliver, Swift’s protagonist, finds himself in the land of the Houyhnhnms, a society governed by rational horses but also infested with the ‘cursed race of Yahoos’. Eventually Gulliver comes
to recognize the Yahoos as bestial humans. Gabbard argues persuasively that Swift here develops a thought experiment based upon John Locke’s distinctions between rational ‘persons’ and those lesser humans lacking rational capacity, also identified by Locke as ‘changelings’ – instances of Locke’s investment in what the philosopher Licia Carlson has called ‘cognitive ableism’. Swift applies Locke’s notions to the world of Houyhnhnms and Yahoos; Gulliver, himself a character whose rationality is ambiguous, slowly recognizes himself to be a ‘yahoo’ – at least so far as his equine hosts are concerned – and all he can succeed in negotiating is most-favoured-beast status. In the end, having been driven from the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver too would like to establish a society based on ‘cognitive ableism’, albeit narcissistically around himself. But he must settle for a parody of that world, and upon his return to eighteenth-century England he shuts himself up in his stable with his horses. In Swift’s satirical inversion, Gulliver’s need to exclude the animalistic ‘other’ results in his retreat from human society.

Like Chris Gabbard, Tim Stainton also tracks the profound impact of the work of John Locke, but in this case focusing on the theory of sensationalism – the theory that knowledge comes not from innate ideas or principles but from sensory experience and our intellect’s capacity to interpret that experience. While sensationalism predates Locke, Stainton explores how Locke’s articulation of it refined the notion. He then traces the permutations of Lockean sensationalism through the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially his *Émile*, a discourse on pedagogy, and the philosophy of the senses and their role in intellectual development presented by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac in his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, which Condillac saw as a ‘supplement’ to Locke’s work. While these thinkers further developed the theory of sensationalism and created thought experiments to elaborate upon it – exemplified by Rousseau’s developing child character Émile and Condillac’s ‘statue’ who acquires senses one by one – it was not until Jean Itard’s famous pedagogical experiments with Victor, the ‘Wild Boy of Aveyron’, that philosophers found a means by which they could apply and test these theories. As we know, Itard’s attempts to instruct Victor met with mixed results, and in the end Itard admitted failure, not of the theory of sensationalism itself but rather of his own capacity to construct proper tests, and of Victor’s appropriateness as a test subject. But this apparent failure did not diminish the impact of Itard’s work; Stainton demonstrates how Itard’s development of the ideas of Locke, Rousseau and Condillac formed the foundation for the hegemonic control later exercised by medicine over both the idea of idiocy and the care and control of those individuals so labelled.

In the following chapter, Openstorytellers, a collective of people with
learning difficulties, put their own labelling under the historical microscope. In the early eighteenth century two exotic individuals were brought to England from Hanover, the second on the orders of the first; both were outsiders, and both found it difficult to communicate with the society around them. The Elector of Hanover, brought over in 1714 to be England’s King George I, was responsible a decade later for bringing ‘Peter the Wild Boy’, recently discovered in the woods outside Hanover. Peter was as famous among cultural commentators of the later eighteenth century as Victor, the 1800s’ ‘Wild Boy of Aveyron’, is among today’s, and can thus be seen as Victor’s precursor in establishing a modern science of idiocy. The discussants place ‘fellow-feeling’ (to use an eighteenth-century term), rather than cognitive ability, at the core of what it is to be human, situating it in the tangible context of Peter’s life experiences rather than in rhetorical generalities. This fellow-feeling stands in contrast to the formal, unfeeling scientific categories that tie human difference to the materiality of genes and ‘syndromes’, and shows how the abuse undergone by outsiders exhibits a greater degree of historical continuity than the shifting conceptual frameworks behind their various constructions and historical manifestations. This chapter is not, therefore, an entry in some intelligence-related ‘special olympics’ where any offering, however slight, has the role of fulfilling the quota demands of an inclusive methodology. Rather, the parallel is with oral history. Life stories, for the purposes of social research, constitute primary sources of equal value with others. The same can be true of conceptual history; the discussants’ choice of focus, in keeping with the scholarly aims of the rest of the volume, supplies a privileged and necessary perspective from which more needs to be heard in future.

The complex interplay of medical, legal, and lay knowledge in legal definitions of idiocy, imbecility, and related terms forms the focus of Simon Jarrett’s chapter. Jarrett documents the shifts in legal theory and, drawing on a series of compelling case histories, illustrates the tensions that would transform legal notions of what might constitute idiocy. Legal definitions of idiocy relied heavily on a set of traditional formulae to determine one’s capacity to manage oneself and one’s estates, but in practice eighteenth-century case histories employed a mix of popular notions about idiocy alongside these formulae to determine the status of individuals brought before the court. Jarrett also shows how legal developments took place in shifting social contexts, as the crown relinquished authority for the protection of the rights of ‘idiots’ and families began to look to the courts to provide this protection instead. A further transformation begins at the start of the nineteenth century, as medical authorities lay claim to knowledge offering clearer and more consistent understandings and definitions of idiocy. However, these claims are not tested in court until the second half of
the nineteenth century, and even then the tensions between reputed medical knowledge, the historically developed opinions of law-makers, and popular lay beliefs continued to shape the understanding of ‘idiocy’ and ‘imbecility’ in the courtroom – rather than the others simply capitulating to medical knowledge. Indeed, as Jarrett shows, when appearing in the court, medical authority often simply repeated established lay and legal notions of idiocy rather than extending an understanding of the concept, formalizing as medical knowledge what had previously been dismissed as the ignorance of lay folk.

Murray Simpson’s chapter examines an overlooked issue, the place of idiocy in psychological theories in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Too often historians of psychology ignore the presence of idiocy in psychological schemata, dismissing it as irrelevant to post-Freudian understandings of the mind. As Simpson shows, this elision obscures our understanding of how these early psychological theorists imagined the mind to work. Simpson tracks the idea of idiocy in the ‘conceptual economy of madness’ to illuminate how it interacts with notions such as madness, melancholy, and mania in the frameworks of mental conditions as developed by William Cullen, Philippe Pinel, John Conolly, Henry Maudsley, A. F. Tredgold, and others whose ideas shaped the development of psychology through the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century idiocy becomes separated from the mainstream of psychology and psychiatry – and from its historiography – as Freudian and other forms of ego-based theories of psychology displace the apparently ‘ego-less’ idiot; Simpson’s research re-inserts the idiot into this history, and in so doing provides insights into the role of professional authorities in defining pathologies and, ultimately, what it means to be human.

In the final chapter, Patrick McDonagh turns to literary evidence to explore the shaping of not only idiocy but the notion of a separate world – both conceptual and actual – that is occupied by those bearing the label. He investigates a number of travelogues written by visitors to the Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots in the 1850s and 1860s in order to track how these writings gave shape to a new idea of the idiot. Asylum travelogues portrayed a parallel world in which this isolated person, cared for by benevolent, enlightened medical authorities, was able to grow and prosper. In most cases, these travelogues were public-relations tools, often connected to fund-raising for the institution; in all cases, they reinforce the idea of the idiot as an individual apart from the rest of society, even while emphasizing his (and, less often, her) humanity. McDonagh’s chapter provides a critical anatomy of these writings, exploring their shared rhetoric and content to demonstrate how they set out to form a new idea of idiocy for readers, contributing to the transformation of the popular understanding of idiocy.
Conclusion

While these chapters draw on varying forms of evidence and theoretical approach, they share an interest in tracking the processes by which the ideas of idiocy, stupidity, folly, imbecility, and related pre-modern terms are given shape and apparent substance, and how these shift across time and place. In their interdisciplinarity they demonstrate the breadth of forces operating in any historical period on the notion of what it is to be human. At the present historical moment, for people bearing the labels, as well as for the rest of us, recognition of how strange and different the past is can help with imagining a future that is also different. The conceptual confinement of ‘intellectual disability’ – the dominance of the cognitive model of what it means to be human – continues today in places where physical confinement is still the norm, but it thrives too in countries like Canada and the UK, which have taken deinstitutionalisation furthest.

Notably in these countries, structured forms of community support for independent living through ‘person-centred planning’ were first introduced as a matter of sheer existential necessity: what were these people going to do once suddenly liberated? The person-centred plan was not premised on what was wrong with people; they were no longer told who they were and who they would become. Rather, they could say it for themselves, and as the oral histories of people liberated from the institutions show, they have wanted all along the same things as everyone else: friendships, independence, a job. The formerly piecemeal practice of person-centred planning has recently entered national legislation in these leading-edge countries, in schools and colleges as well as in adult social policy. Making it work within long-standing professional and administrative structures and, where necessary, dismantling or transforming them, is, of course, a more difficult enterprise. Nevertheless, this practice and its enshrinement in law are historically of great significance inasmuch as they signal the first change for a century and a half in how identities are formed and conceived.

Not only does knowing that things were different in the past prompt the imagining of a different future, imagining that future is itself a historical event, an intervention by historical actors. It is what people do, sooner or later. And if those people happen to be historical researchers, imagination can be an aid to scholarship. It may be a cliché to say that you cannot know where a society is going if you do not know where it came from, but it is also the case that you will not be able to know where it came from without also having some feel for where it might now be going, and for your own place in that trajectory.
INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENT CRITICAL HISTORY

Notes

4 See, for example, Richard Scheerenberger, A History of Mental Retardation (Baltimore: P. H. Brookes, 1983).
6 Digby, ‘Contexts and Perspectives’, 3.
15 Digby, ‘Contexts and Perspectives’, 1.
16 Mathew Thomson, The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and

17 Thomson, The Problem of Mental Deficiency, 35.
18 Jackson, The Borderland of Imbecility, 11.
19 Martin Halliwell, Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 14.
21 C. F. Goodey, A History of Intelligence and ‘Intellectual Disability’: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe (Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011).
24 Ibid., 7.


38 See, for example, the ‘Life Stories’ materials gathered on The Open University’s Social History of Learning Disability website: www.open.ac.uk/health-and-social-care/research/shld/resources-and-publications/life-stories, accessed 8 August, 2016.