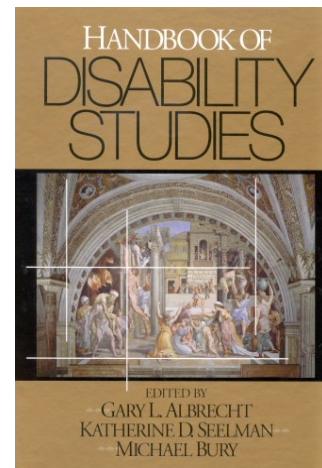




**Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman & Michael Bury (eds.), *Handbook of Disability Studies*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage Publications, 2001. xii + 852 pp.**

Consisting of thirty-four self-contained essay chapters and an editors' introduction, the *Handbook of Disability Studies* is a big book. Reading it without the use of a table to rest it on, requires more manual dexterity and strength than this reviewer was able to muster. Bulky and cumbersome, and containing nearly nine hundred pages it is heavy and difficult to handle. Whether the publishers have any future intention of splitting the volume into its three component parts and producing three separate books, issuing it as a paperback, or making its contents available on-line is



unknown, but I would recommend that these are all options that should be considered if it is to reach the widest possible audience. As it stands, the *Handbook of Disability Studies'* size, make up and price suggests it is aimed primarily at the library market and is pitched as a comprehensive reference work, rather than an accessible and affordable collection for individuals. This is a situation I would like to see change.

Design and distribution criticisms apart, Albrecht et al. have achieved a great deal in their collection. Many of the articles are incisive, wide-ranging and thorough. Those interested enough in disability issues to consult this book will find the experience informative, thought provoking and worthwhile. Its multidisciplinary approach means that there is something here of obvious relevance to a variety of fields, including history. Of the several contributions that touch upon historical themes, Braddock and Parish's 'An Institutional History of Disability' is the most glaringly pertinent to our discipline; I shall therefore concentrate on this particular essay.

Braddock and Parish's chapter is representative of much of the historical literature being produced under the umbrella of disability studies in that it is written by non-historians with only the vaguest idea of history. Often, assumptions are made and propagated without even the slightest reference to the historical record. Why the editors chose two experts on public health to write this chapter is unclear. Trained and competent historians of disability do exist, yet it appears that either they could not be persuaded to contribute to this volume, or that they were simply not asked to. Whatever the case, the absence of their insights is a serious oversight on the part of the editors.

A glance at Braddock and Parish's bibliography for this chapter suggests that they have not even consulted the most well known disability histories written in the last decade. There is, for instance, no mention of anything written by Paul Longmore, or David Gerber—both of who are authors that I would consider essential reading for anyone seeking to write a history of disability. Not surprisingly, this lack of familiarity with the relevant historiography undermines the chapter's value as a good introduction to its theme.

Beginning with antiquity and ending with the present, Braddock and Parish examine the institutions created throughout the ages for the confinement and treatment of the disabled and argue that

the 'segregation and stigmatization' of the physiologically impaired was the result of changing attitudes towards poverty and the medicalisation of disability over the last three centuries (p. 11). Most of the existing historical literature on disability would seem to support this position, though whether it will stand up to detailed interrogation through thorough archival research remains to be seen. The disability history that has been written tends to be cursory and impressionistic and it would be unwise to advance an overarching theory at this stage. Despite this cautionary note, however, Braddock and Parish's interpretation does serve a useful purpose: by seeking to theorise disability from an historical perspective they provide us with an explanatory framework in which to define future research questions.

Overall, Braddock and Parish's chapter has its strengths and weaknesses and these reflect the current position of disability history within disability studies in general. That they are not afraid to theorise a little about the past should be commended. Such efforts can give disability historians the direction that is often hard to find when a field is still in its infancy. But their poor utilisation of what historical research has been done illustrates the need for those familiar with historiography, rather than experts from other subjects with little more than a passing interest in our discipline, to engage more fully in the production of disability history. If we do not do this, then the theorisation of the past within disability studies will lack the historical grounding it needs to fully comprehend the complex nature of the field's central analytical concept.

**The author of the review, Daniel Blackie, is a PhD student in North American studies at the Renvall Institute, University of Helsinki, Finland. His research theme is about 18th century soldiers in North American war of independence.**

ENNEN JANYT  
Historian tietosanommat