

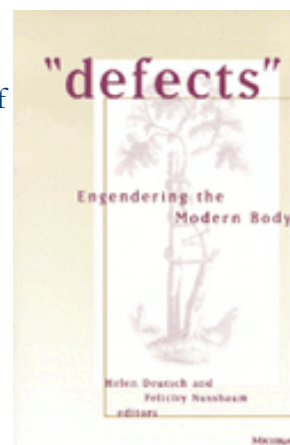


Daniel Blackie

Disability in the 18th Century

**Helen Deutsch & Felicity Nussbaum (eds):
Defects: Engendering the Modern Body. Ann
Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000. xi + 332 pp.**

For historians interested in disability or the eighteenth century, this volume will be a valuable addition to their libraries. Consisting of eleven essay-chapters and an introduction by the editors, *Defects* successfully attempts 'to define and contribute to an emerging area of disability studies in the early modern and Enlightenment periods, to trace its history and to explore its interconnections with other imagined communities'. Its essays draw primarily on Britain and France for their examples, and generally concentrate on 'literary representations' of disability, such as those found in novels. This is a useful and rewarding approach as it helps us to identify the underlying discourses affecting the lives of the disabled. It does not, however, allow us to fully appreciate what the practical consequences of living with a physical or mental impairment were. By focusing on ideological constructions, the essays in this collection look at what it should have meant to be disabled, not what it actually meant for those labelled as such. Few of the contributions in this collection look at disability from the perspective of the individual experiencing it. As a result, the whole volume has a very impersonal feel about it, and the disabled fail to emerge as real people from underneath the mysterious forces oppressing them.



Despite this minor criticism, *Defects* does an admirable job of illustrating the significance of the eighteenth century to the formulation of the modern discourse of disability. As Lennard Davis points out in his excellent piece, this was a 'liminal period' in which an older, more superstitious, understanding of physical and mental impairment was gradually replaced by a medicalised one. The essays in this collection identify and chart this change and will be of immense use to those interested in the changes in disability over time. Where they generally fall short, however, is in their explanatory power. For historians, it is not good enough to simply say change has occurred; we must also seek to explain it. This is something that, in my opinion, *Defects* fails to do.

On the whole, though, this is a good book that I would recommend to all those engaged in disability research. At times, its language is turgid and stuffy, but don't be put off by this. For those who persevere through the difficult patches of cultural studies jargon, the result is rewarding and the effort worthwhile.

The book was reviewed by Daniel Blackie, who is a researcher in Renvall-institute. He is specialized in disability studies.

