In the book *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, Steven Noll and James W. Trent Jr. have compiled a refreshing collection of histories representative of the "new disability history" to emerge from Disability Studies (Longmore & Umansky, 2000). The book forges new directions by including historical pieces on disability and the family; analyzing the cultural representations of persons with intellectual disabilities (the contemporary term used for mental retardation) in literature; and by delving into the complex social, political, and economic forces of disability oppression throughout history. In doing so, the reader uncovers the roots of contemporary issues and debates concerning intellectual disability today.

This book describes the history of mental retardation from Massachusetts's first canvas of the prevalence of mental retardation in the 1840's to the role of litigation in the 21st Century. The book is divided into five chronological parts, with each one beginning with one to two primary sources. Part I discusses the education and treatment of "idiots" before formal supports were available in the states. Philip Ferguson's fascinating chapter on the rise of the almshouse, the precursor of the asylum, introduces economic factors and societal attitudes, such as the notions of the "deserving poor" and the "non-deserving poor," in explaining the role of the almshouse in the lives of persons with disabilities. Adding to the richness of this history Penny Richard creatively uses mid-19th century historical sources such as popular fiction and the words of parents who were known figures of the day to illustrate societal attitudes towards families in that era. These attitudes included blaming the families for the child's disability and viewing caring for a family member with a disability as a "sacred duty."

Part II focuses on the systematic classification of persons with intellectual disabilities as "feeble-minded," "idiot," "imbecile," and "mongol." It illustrates how fears of hereditary transmission of disability dominated scientific discourse during the early 1900s. Two of the chapters trace the "racialized" views of Caucasian superiority in the classification of Down syndrome as "mongolism," and the continuing implication of this association with other disabilities (Longmore & Umansky, 2000).
eventual repudiation of this association with racial atavism. Janice Brockley's insightful analyses of literature portrays shifting societal attitudes toward the family from 1850 through 1965, ranging from the moral mother ("saviors of the afflicted") to the scientific mother ("the physician's tool") to the unfit mother (e.g., "over-protective" or creator of autism). This chapter is also unique in its depiction of the highly gendered attitudes to parents, with very different views of fathers. The last two chapters delineate the role of persons with intellectual disability in literature, and how their portrayal (sometimes even as the narrators) reflects American culture's ambivalence to them as "menaces to society," "innocent offenders," and as hypersexual beings who would breed undesirables. The authors wove the depiction of these characters with the rise and fall of the eugenics movement.

Part III illustrates the interplay between institutionalization, criminalization, and sterilization of persons with intellectual disabilities. Harry Laughlin's chapter demonstrates the chilling impact of the eugenics movement at the turn of the century in the promotion of sterilization as a method of reducing the number of persons with disabilities. Feeble-mindedness is listed as "one of the several kinds of social inadequacy with which the state must deal" (p. 225). Nicole Rafter addresses the early 20th century belief that individuals with intellectual disabilities had the intrinsic potential for criminal behavior. Disability was merely a symptom of a larger societal degeneration. Molly Ladd-Taylor's thought-provoking essay draws connections between the practice of sterilization and contemporary issues. She prophetically concludes, "It is a sad and disturbing tale of political expediency and taxpayer stinginess that reveals the heavy price that individuals -- and indeed, the entire society -- pay when the most vulnerable members of a community do not have access to the services and resources they need" (p. 296).

Part IV chronicles the impact of influential early advocates in the field, starting with Eunice Kennedy Shriver's essay in the 1962 Saturday Evening Post. Shriver's idealistic composition marks the turn of societal attitudes from institutionalization and sterilization towards community care and increased family involvement. Examining the impact of military history Steven Gelb's chapter is a fascinating look at how World War II and the need for soldiers paradoxically resulted in a short-term increased social status for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Part IV also presents essays on the pivotal role families played in advocating for public education for persons with intellectual disabilities, and the struggles families faced to keep their child at home despite a lack of community supports.


Mental retardation in America is a highly readable and unique compilation of essays on the social construction of disability over the past 175 years. It is a useful textbook for courses covering disability and historical issues. Until recently, histories written on the topic of "mental retardation" have focused heavily on chronicling the rise and fall of institutions. The vast majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities were never institutionalized: they remained at home with their families as they do today. Yet this history has been largely neglected.

Mental retardation in America is unique in its extensive inclusion of histories from the perspective of families. Though some chapters do include the perspectives of persons with intellectual disabilities through quotes and through characters in literature, the book would be strengthened by a chapter on the self-advocacy
movement, written or co-written by a person with intellectual disability. This would provide a richer perspective on what is means to be a person with intellectual disabilities in America.

References: