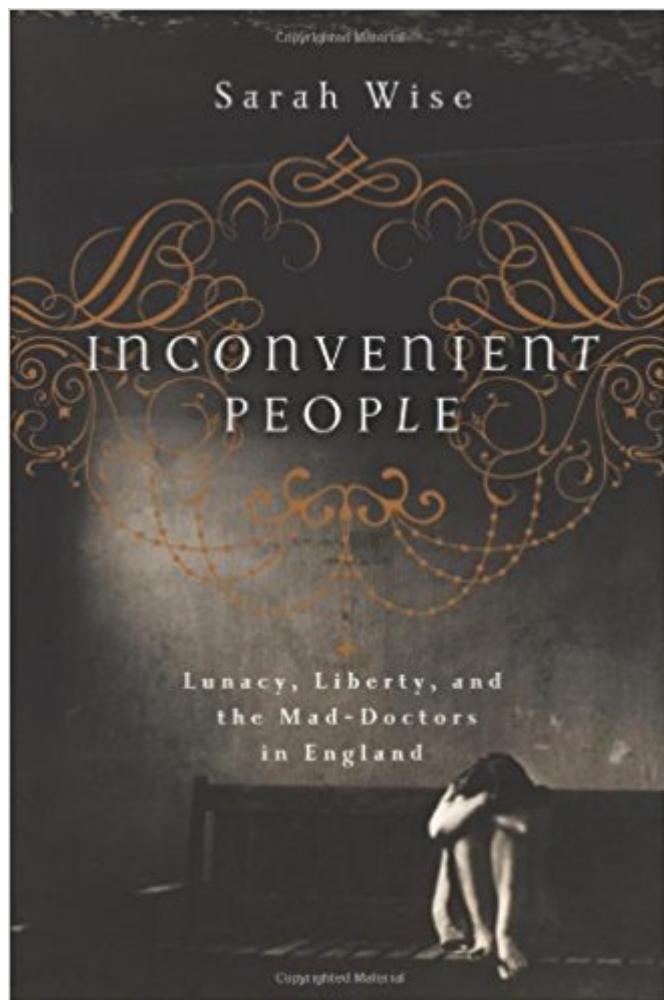


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Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty, And The Mad-Doctors In England



Synopsis

The phenomenon of false allegations of mental illness is as old as our first interactions as human beings. Every one of us has described some other person as crazy or insane, and most all of us have had periods, moments at least, of madness. But it took the confluence of the law and medical science, mad-doctors, alienists, priests and barristers, to raise the matter to a level of science, capable of being used by conniving relatives, designing families and scheming neighbors to destroy people who found themselves in the way, people whose removal could provide their survivors with money or property or other less frivolous benefits. Girl Interrupted is only a recent example. And reversing this sort of diagnosis and incarceration became increasingly more difficult, as even the most temperate attempt to leave these homes or hospitals was deemed crazy. Kept in a madhouse, one became a little mad, as Jack Nicholson and Ken Kesey explain in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. In this sadly terrifying, emotionally moving, and occasionally hilarious book, twelve cases of contested lunacy are offered as examples of the shifting arguments regarding what constituted sanity and insanity. They offer unique insight into the fears of sexuality, inherited madness, greed and fraud, until public feeling shifted and turned against the rising alienists who would challenge liberty and freedom of people who were perhaps simply difficult but were turned into victims of this unscrupulous trade. This fascinating book is filled with stories almost impossible to believe but wildly engaging, a book one will not soon forget.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for *Inconvenient People*"This might seem morbid reading, but Wise's research is rigorous, her writing is lucid and witty, and this book is engaging, although disturbing. A must-read for those who work in the mental health industry, I think most people will find it both eye-opening and provocative."The Guardian"WISE'S meticulously researched study adds a fresh perspective to current scholarship on insanity and offers a chilling reminder of 'the stubborn unchangeability of many aspects of the lunacy issue.'" —Publishers WeeklyPraise for the UK edition of *Inconvenient People*"I enjoyed *Inconvenient People*...it is an illuminating look at an area of social history that inspired Wilkie Collins among others." —Sebastian Faulks, Telegraph, Christmas 2012 Books of the Year"WISE is a terrific researcher and storyteller. Here she has woven a series of case studies into a fascinating history of insanity in the 19th century." —Kate Summerscale, Guardian, Books of the Year 2012"I thrilled read to Sarah Wise's *Inconvenient People*, an enthralling study of those who fell foul of Victorian mad-doctors and greedy relatives." —Philip Hoare, Sunday Telegraph, Books of the Year 2012Praise for *The Italian Boy*“WISE lights up a very dark chapter of London's history…She has a Dickensian sense of London's back alleys and dim corridors, and her meticulous survey of London's eastern slums, where the resurrection men plied their trade, abounds in detail…Her achievement allows us to grasp some of the terrible secrets those mysteries concealed.—The Boston Globe“WISE'S impeccably researched and artfully constructed narrative shows how a band of bodysnatchers went from taking dead bodies to making them…The *Italian Boy* carves out its own niche in the darkness and, like any good mystery, leaves more mysteries trailing in its wake.—Washington Post“A highly atmospheric account of corpse trafficking and killing in early 19th-century London...WISE'S stately, richly descriptive narrative… evokes tumultuous 1830s London...A fine historical and social reconstruction of a vile crime.—Kirkus

Sarah Wise studied at Birkbeck College at the University of London. Her most recent book, *The Blackest Streets* was shortlisted for the Ondaatje Prize (2009) and her first book, *The Italian Boy: Murder and Grave Robbery in London* was shortlisted for the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize and won the Crime Writer's Gold Dagger for nonfiction. She lives in London.

Absolutely brilliant. This work does more than give a comprehensive, very human look at the law and lunacy in the UK from the late 1700s and through the 1800s, it also sweeps away a lot of popular misconceptions. This book alternates between an outline of various lunacy laws with explanations

that put those laws in context, and carefully detailed case histories that result from those laws or cause a change of the laws. We get to see past the sensationalist accounts of the press and public hysteria to what was actually happening. I found it fascinating to learn the truth behind the myths, so to speak. Well worth reading if you have any interest in the subject at all, with a useful collection of sources listed for further study. This book reminds me of Koven's "Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London" in that it takes on an area of Victorian history, debunks an accepted wisdom that didn't add up to me, and replaces it with something that makes more sense.

Fascinating stories, mostly well explained. At times, the author's style is influenced heavily by Victorian fiction, which makes the work seem somewhat less than reliably unbiased and factual. Nonetheless, I plan to take a look at Ms. Wise's other works, since she is obviously a terrific researcher with a great grasp of her subject.

Hardback book in great condition!

Perfect condition! Exactly what I wanted

Great reading book

The book is extremely well researched but some of the case histories go into a length far more than necessary to get the point of the book across. The writing often seems in the style of mid-nineteenth century England making for some heavy reading. It seems that nearly half of the "book" is references, citations, and more case histories. It is interesting to hear about how mental illness was perceived at the time and the illicit scams undertaken by some unscrupulous "physicians" of the time who also operated "asylums" for a profit. However, overall, I found the book something of a drag.

This well researched book is about 12 cases; thread together to illustrate the effects of the "Lunacy Laws" in Victorian England, in the 19th century. Ms. Wise writes as a social historian, who uses the unfortunates incarcerated in the variety of public and private madhouses, to describe the contemporary English society's ethics. She cuts a wide swath from the slums to the upper echelon of the aristocracy, distinguished families and prominent professionals. Ms. Wise clearly exposes the shenanigans and hypocrisy of the "alienists" (psychiatrists/psychologists) in cahoots with members

of the judiciary who facilitated the confinement of many victims based solely on greed. Many examples of the so-called 'lunatics' were simply eccentrics who did not toe the line within the culture, or held alternative religious beliefs, or resisted their families' wishes, or were an inconvenience or impediment to their relatives' acquisition of wealth or property, or were simply an inconvenient burden on the family. Often the victim would be declared insane and imprisoned in the family's home, or in one of the myriad privately run madhouses, run by an alienist, for a fee. In most cases, the 'lunatic' would forfeit his/her possessions to the relatives (who are "caring" for them) or to the adjudicating Lunacy Board to pay for their upkeep. The majority of the funds were diverted to the trustees' personal coffers in most cases. The diagnosis, incarceration and overall brutal treatment of the insane often bordered on the criminal. Public asylums and lunatic wards in workhouses meted out the worst abuse of the inmates, including beatings, heavy metal shackles, bed restraints, dunking in ice-cold water baths etc. But it was the upscale, private, genteel and expensive asylums that characterize these times; they were prisons, nonetheless, with bars on the windows, locked doors and "straight waistcoats, iron whole-leg hobbles, handcuffs, finger confining instruments and manacles" used to control unruly patients. Readers of Jane Austen, Wilkie Collins et al may get the impression that the majority of 'lunatics' were hysterical women locked up in the attic or young damsels falsely imprisoned by nefarious relatives; but the reality was that the majority confined to asylums were males. The definition of insanity was very vague at best, and 'alienists' and asylum keepers were prepared to commit almost anyone for money. Eventually there was an outcry against these abuses when anyone can be accused of insanity, imprisoned without a trial and with no recourse of appeal or knowledge of the accuser. In 1845, the Lunacy Commission was established for the purpose of regulating and prosecuting doctors and asylum owners for abuses; but collusion, complacency and corruption allowed exploitation and mistreatments to continue, until Parliament intervened and passed the Lunacy Acts in the 1860s. It was not until 1930 that the Mental Treatment Act was enacted to allow involuntary, voluntary and temporary confinement. The book includes many known personalities of the time; Charles Dickens, Lady Rosina Litton, John Percival, Charles Lutwidge Dodson (Lewis Carroll) in various cameos. No spoilers here. The author concludes on a somewhat depressing note that depicted the extreme abuses of the mid-twentieth century when youthful unruly behavior, rebellious attitudes or illegitimate pregnancy could land a teenager in an asylum for several years. In spite of the many advances in medical research and treatment of mental illness, the stigma remains. This is a well-researched, detailed book based on primary sources and original archives, presented in a clear well-organized narrative. It is replete with details and minutiae, but is never boring. It is certain to appeal to mental health professionals, students of

social and medical history and buffs of the Victorian era. The lay reader will find many areas of the book interesting and informative.

As a huge fan of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, it's hard not to view Wise's *Inconvenient People* through the lens of that work, for which it serves as part-companion, part-rebuttal. Using twelve case studies as a framework, Wise presents a brilliant picture of madness and madhouses in Britain during the nineteenth century, and the social, economic, and political forces that governed both. (As a bonus, there's also a great deal on Victorian swingers, and literary madness.) I was initially expecting something a bit more sweeping - along the lines, say, of Scull's excellent *Madness in Civilization* - but Wise's focus on the precise details of every case presented brings the tragedy and horror the victims of Britain's system endured into sharp relief. If there's a weakness here it's in the underplaying of what are clear instabilities in some of the patients covered - Wise's point is well made that people who managed to recover while in care had a nearly impossible time getting out, but she seems to gloss over the fact that in some (not all) of the cases she covers there were clear inciting incidents that seemed to warrant putting the patient under supervision. *Inconvenient People*, with its exacting detail, might not be for everyone, but fans of Gothic fiction and Wilkie Collins should flock to it, as should students of the history of psychiatry, or anyone who wants to feel significantly better about the modern mental healthcare system.

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