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## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Penny L. Richards

### WELCOME!

When I'm not working on this fine organization's newsletter, sometimes I'm writing Wikipedia entries, and sometimes they're about disability history topics (of course). In the past few months, I've started entries for the wheelchair manufacturer **Everest & Jennings**, blind biochemist **Dilworth Wayne Woolley**, accessible playground nonprofit **Shane's Inspiration**, South African activist **Maria Rantho**, baseball coach **Mary Dobkin**, and businessman **Dwight D. Guilfoil Jr.**, among others. Would you like to join me, or maybe just learn more about disability topics on Wikipedia? Check out **WikiProject Disability**:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Disability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Disability)

**If you have a moment, would you contact DHA President Sandy Sufian at (sufians@uic.edu)** and let DHA know if you have any suggestions for improvements, especially with regard to activities or programs? The DHA Board of Directors are striving to find new ways to promote disability history and would be very appreciative of your feedback.

**Have you renewed your DHA membership for 2016?** Please consider doing that right now, while you're enjoying the newsletter, it won't take but a moment. And if you already have your membership, perhaps make a surprise gift to a colleague or student?

<http://www.dishist.org/join.htm>

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### 2015 DHA Publication Award Best Article/Book Chapter

**Dea H. Boster, "I Made Up My Mind to Act Both Deaf and Dumb': Displays of Disability and Slave Resistance in the Antebellum American South," *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 71-98.**

In her article Boster sets off for an intriguing historical journey along the intersection of disability and race in antebellum American history. She does so in a manner that is perfectly in line with up to date disability studies perspectives, namely examining history in order to demonstrate that disability (the concept as well as the embodied experiences) cannot be summarized by adjectives like passive, dependent and repugnant. On the basis of impressive historical source analysis Boster convincingly shows how slaves made use of the category and reality of disability in order to resist their actual living conditions. By feigning to be disabled they sought to change their lives for the best – hoping to become free citizens or to be released from work for some time. By demonstrating that disability, in Boster's words, became "a contested space for masters and slaves to negotiate authority over enslaved bodies" she opens up a promising field of historical research and demonstrates the value of the cultural model for disability historians. Moreover, and equally important, she has included Sieber's concept of masquerade into her analyses which resulted in a perfect blend of historical craftsmanship and theoretical capacity. This is an engaging paper, connecting the histories of slavery and disability and asserting the deployment of disability as a means of agency and empowerment. Boster focusses on the intersection between race and disabilities and shows how the construction of disabilities becomes apparent. By taking up different perspectives the paper shows vividly how disabilities were used for strategic life planning in the past. Furthermore, by turning to aspects of resistance, the narrative shows how disabilities framed identities over the time.

### **Honorable Mention:**

Daniel Blackie, "Disability, Dependency and the Family in the Early United States," in Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, eds. *Disability Histories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 17-34.

Stacy Clifford, "The Capacity Contract: Locke, Disability, and the Political Exclusion of 'Idiots'," *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2 (2014): 90-103.

**CFP: *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, Special issue:  
Literature for Young People**

Guest editors: Chloë Hughes and Elizabeth A. Wheeler

This special issue of the JLCDS aims to bring together an international and multidisciplinary base of readers and writers who explore disability in literature published for young people.

While disability and deafness have often featured in literature for young people, their most usual role has been as a “narrative prosthesis” supporting the storyline. Disability and Deaf literature for young readers has boomed in the twenty-first century, including bestsellers like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Wonder*, *Wonderstruck*, *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Out of My Mind*, as well as a growing collection of texts written in or with Blissymbolics, Braille, Sign Language, or in tactile, textile, interactive, and digital formats. This special issue reconsiders the history and current urgency of disability and deafness in literature for young readers in light of this twenty-first century publishing boom.

Children are often on the front lines of the struggle over the meanings of disability. For young people both with and without disabilities, the works they encounter provide long-lasting frames of reference for understanding bodymind diversity. It is especially important that scholars well versed in disability and Deaf justice, theory, and lived experience critique this canon.

We seek articles on a wide variety of genres, including fantasy, dystopias, science fiction, graphic memoirs and novels, biography, digital forms like blogs and vlogs, “misfit romance,” “sick lit,” and superhero stories. Disabilities that only exist in fictional worlds are fair game. The guest editors are interested in submissions that cross-examine race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as disability and deafness and represent a wide cross-section of international literatures and ethnic groups.

We welcome proposals from disability and Deaf studies scholars (especially those who may not have previously written about literature for young people), but also encourage submissions from scholars of other disciplines who might lend their perspectives on using literature for young people with representations of disability to explore bodymind diversity with children and adolescents. We are also interested in intergenerational dialogues, interviews with authors and illustrators who have included protagonists with disabilities or published books for young people in accessible formats, as well as reviews of recently published young adult literature that features protagonists with disabilities. We particularly encourage submissions from scholars with the same disability as the protagonist.

Examples of content foci for this special issue of the JLCDS include, but are not limited to:

- Disabled and Deaf characters challenging normalcy
- Fantastic Freaks and Critical Crips in countercultural texts for young people
- Aesthetic/artistic representations of disability in picturebooks
- Literature for young people by Disabled or Deaf authors and illustrators
- Beyond “narrative prosthesis”
- Children’s and Young Adult Literature in accessible formats
- The role /aesthetics of disability accommodations in texts for young people
- Visibility or invisibility of Disability Rights in literature for young people
- Intersectionality: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender identity
- Representations of chronic illness and mental health
- Biographical writing for young people—what is / is not included?
- Critiques of didactic texts for young people on disability
- Interviews of authors/ illustrators
- Reviews of recently published children’s and young adult literature with representations of disability

**Timetable:**

**April 15, 2016:** submission of a 500 word proposal for articles or 150 word proposal for reviews and a one-page curriculum vitae to guest editors at [hughesc@mail.wou.edu](mailto:hughesc@mail.wou.edu) and [ewheeler@uoregon.edu](mailto:ewheeler@uoregon.edu).

**May 15, 2016:** prospective authors notified of proposal status.

**November 1, 2016:** final versions of selected papers due to editors.

**February 1, 2016:** finalists selected. Decisions and revisions on submissions sent to authors.

**May 1, 2017:** final, revised papers due from finalists.

**Kalamazoo Museum Hosts Helen Keller Exhibit**

Kalamazoo Valley Museum in Michigan is hosting an exhibit titled “Child in a Strange Country: Helen Keller and the History of Education for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired.” The exhibit is on loan from the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky, and will be open until 10 January 2016. For more information:

<http://comvoicesonline.com/20169/education/kalamazoo-valley-museums-helen-keller-exhibit/>

## **Presentation on American disability history made in NENU, China**

On May 3rd, 2015, Shu Wan, a recent MA student of disability studies in the Northeast Normal University, Changchun, introduced the development and diversification of disability historiography from the time of Professor Paul K. Longmore to the present day, especially Professor Beth Linker's argument that disability history is equal to 'disease one'. He highlighted major and popular topics in the field, including "Deaf Culture and History", "Blind History", "Eugenics", "Disabled Veterans" and "History of Mental, Intellectual and Developmental Disability." He proposed dimensions and aspects of disability history that historians should focus on and study more, including the roles of religion and various ethnicity/immigration questions in American disability history. Finally, he appealed to Chinese historians to pay more attention to new methodological trends, especially disabled people's diverse experiences in ancient and modern Chinese history. Wan is about to join the University of Iowa under the supervision of Professor Douglas Baynton to continue his studies of American history.

## **“How We Read: A Sensory History of Books for Blind People”**

“How We Read: A Sensory History of Books for Blind People” is now online at <http://www.howweread.co.uk/>

This exhibition explores the history of reading technologies that have been designed for blind people over the past two centuries. The exhibition begins with the development of embossed literature at the start of the nineteenth century, examines innovations in sound and optical character recognition scanning devices during the twentieth century, and reflects on the status of today's assistive technologies. From raised print to talking books and optophones, such devices have made reading material accessible to many thousands of visually disabled readers in Britain.

Exhibition videos, photos, and sound recordings are available in the website's “Gallery” section.

Best wishes,

Matt Rubery & Heather Tilley

<http://www.sed.qmul.ac.uk/staff/ruberym.htm>

### **CFP: Berkshire Conference (New York, 2017)**

The 2017 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Genders, and Sexualities invites proposals for panels and individual papers on topics related to disability and women, gender or sexuality. See the complete call for papers for more details:

<http://2017berkshireconference.hofstra.edu/call-for-papers/>

The deadline to submit proposals is January 15, 2016. The conference “Difficult Conversations: Thinking and Talking about Women, Genders, and Sexualities Inside and Outside the Academy” will be at Hofstra University (Long Island, NY) June 1-4, 2017. Contact: Karyn Valerius at [nuckmv@hofstra.edu](mailto:nuckmv@hofstra.edu)

### **CFP: Accessibility in the Medieval World**

Cornell University—Medieval Studies Student Colloquium

**Saturday, February 20th, 2016**

The graduate students of Cornell’s Medieval Studies Program are pleased to announce their twenty-sixth annual Student Colloquium, which will take place on Saturday, February 20th at the A.D. White House. This year’s colloquium will be focused around the concept of ‘accessibility,’ its connotations, and consequences in the medieval world. The Middle Ages are conventionally seen as static and hierarchical, marked by impermeability of social, geographic, and cultural boundaries. This conference seeks to foreground the dynamism and fluidity of the Middle Ages by focusing upon the points of access by which these borders were negotiated and blurred.

We very much look forward to welcoming Professor Jonathan Hsy, George Washington University, as our keynote speaker whose talk will explore how digital media enable new modes of crafting disability history.

In addressing our theme, papers may consider topics including (but not limited to):

- Access to education and knowledge production
- Ethnicity, identity, and access to power
- Identity politics
- Travel and trade
- Diplomacy and diplomatics
- Modern modes of accessing ‘the Medieval’
- Memory, authority, and the ethics of reading
- Accessing the Divine

We invite graduate students to share papers focusing on Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the Early Modern Period in Western Europe and beyond. We welcome submissions in all disciplines, including literature, history, history of art, archaeology, linguistics, musicology, paleography, philosophy, and theology.

Abstract submissions (c. 300 words) for 20-minute presentations must be received by **November 13th, 2015** in order to be considered. They may be submitted by e-mail attachment to [mssc@cornell.edu](mailto:mssc@cornell.edu) with the subject line MSSC CFP.

**Contact Info:**

John Wyatt Greenlee

**Contact Email:**

[mssc@cornell.edu](mailto:mssc@cornell.edu)



## UPCOMING CONFERENCES

- 27 November 2015, London Metropolitan Archives, London, UK  
**Disability and Impairment: A Technological Fix?**  
<http://events.history.ac.uk/event/show/14539>
- 3-5 December 2015, Columbia University, New York, USA  
**The Politics of Memory: Victimization, Violence and Contested Narratives of the Past** <http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/?q=ahda/conference>
- 16 December 2015, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool UK  
**Symposium of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies**  
<http://www.disabilitystudiesnetwork.gla.ac.uk/2015/08/22/cfp-the-symposium-of-literary-and-cultural-disability-studies-liverpool-hope-univeristy/>
- 11-13 April 2016, Bethesda, Maryland, USA  
**Images and Texts in Medical History Workshop**  
[https://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/nlm\\_host\\_images\\_texts\\_med.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/nlm_host_images_texts_med.html)
- 13-16 April 2016, Reno, Nevada, USA  
**Western Social Science Association, Section on Chronic Disease and Disability** [www.WSSAweb.com](http://www.WSSAweb.com)
- 15-16 April 2016, Birkbeck, University of London, UK  
**Cultures of Harm in Institutions of Care: Historical & Contemporary Perspectives**  
[www.bbk.ac.uk/trauma/events](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/trauma/events)
- 25-26 April 2016, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA  
**Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity**  
<http://www.pacrim.hawaii.edu/submissions>
- 26-27 May 2016, London, UK  
Conference: **After the End of Disease**  
<http://www.histmed.org/announcements/calls-for-papers/calls-for-papers-after-the-end-of-disease-1403>
- 8-11 June 2016, Phoenix, Arizona, USA  
**Society for Disability Studies: Disability in the Public Sphere**  
[https://www.disstudies.org/conferences/phoenix\\_cfp](https://www.disstudies.org/conferences/phoenix_cfp)

## **Accommodating to Accommodation**

Haley Gienow-McConnell, PhD ABD, York University

*[Haley Gienow-McConnell was a recent recipient of the DHA graduate travel scholarship.—Ed.]*

In early February 2015 I was delighted to receive an invitation to present a paper at the “Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium” in York, United Kingdom. By early March 2015 I was anxious about the logistics of traveling from Niagara Falls, Ontario to the UK with my baby daughter, who would be just shy of one year by the time of the conference. Nonetheless, I booked our travel and resolved to accomplish this feat to earn my ‘PhD candidate mama’ credentials. By late March 2015 my anxiety and excitement were for nought. A heated labour dispute between my university’s administration and the union of which my graduate student cohort formed a part resulted in a labour disruption that impacted my ability to travel to the UK. I was going to have to excuse myself from the conference.

Such was my initial defeatist attitude when confronted with my seemingly untenable situation. In my view, I was at the mercy of factors beyond my control, and my instinct was to capitulate to the problem. I could not single-handedly resolve the labour dispute at my university, nor could I change the date of the symposium to accommodate the terminus of the labour disruption. In other words, I believed that the solution to my problem either rested exclusively with me, or else a solution did not exist. I brought up the email invitation from the coordinators of the “Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium” with the intention of replying regretfully that I was no longer able to participate in the conference, that is, until I read their invitation again and paid closer attention to their offers of accommodation and accessibility for conference participants and attendees. It was then that I realized that the solution to my problem existed outside of me, that it existed in the conference coordinators and their willingness to accommodate a situation that barred me from full participation in the conference. I emailed the conference coordinators, explained my situation, and asked whether I might participate via videoconferencing in lieu of my traveling to the UK. To my relief, they obligingly accommodated this request and on May 14, 2015 conference attendees were treated to a video version of “Representations of Historical Disability on *The Waltons*, 1936-1945, 1972-1981”.

I was grateful for the outcome. I could not think of a better forum to share this particular piece of work than the “Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium”. I shared with my audience thoughts on how CBS Television’s *The Waltons* is a rich and valuable resource for the study of disability history. During my presentation I elaborated on how *The Waltons*’ impressive number of disability-related storylines and its dual

historical milieus, that is, the Depression and World War II era in which the show was set, and the 1970s and early 1980s in which it was produced and aired, make it a unique resource for understanding historical meanings, perceptions, and representations of disability in the United States, as well as for understanding the flexibility and fluidity of those conditions throughout America's twentieth century.

I would like to believe that the audience was intrigued and enlightened by my words and ideas. That is, after all, the main thrust behind participating in conferences. However, more important than whatever paltry wisdom I was able to impart while participating in the conference were the lessons I learned about what it means to be accommodated. As the architects of a conference whose main subject was disability, the organizers behind the "Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium" were highly attuned to the power of accommodation. They understood that as a result of circumstances beyond my control, that is, the labour disruption at my university, I would not be able to participate in their conference unless accommodated. Thankfully, they perceived value in having me participate in their conference, and they recognized the power that accommodation has to promote and acknowledge the value of individuals.

As a doctoral student in Disability History and the spouse of a person with a disability, I thought I understood what it meant to be accommodated, but I am humbled to admit that until I had to advocate for my own set of accommodations, I did not. Like so many of you reading this, I have long been a staunch advocate for accommodation as a set of practices which promote the full inclusion and participation of all individuals in whatever forums they wish to engage. However, as an individual who has rarely required accommodation in my day to day life, I have been vocal mostly in support of others' right and needs. I now appreciate that being vocal in support of one's own needs feels entirely different. I now appreciate why, sometimes, my deaf husband decides to forgo accommodation rather than engage in the delicate and often maddening art of negotiation that comes with asserting one's right to be accommodated.

Even though being accommodated is a reasonable expectation, and being allowed full and accessible participation in any chosen forum is, I would argue, a fundamental right that we all should enjoy, the fact of the matter is asking to be accommodated is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable because, though those who seek accommodation do so with conviction, they are uncertain of the convictions of those from whom they seek accommodation. It is uncomfortable because, though those who seek accommodation are convinced of their worthiness, in seeking accommodation they take a leap of faith that those from whom they seek it respect and value their worth. I was struck by the fact that I questioned whether I was worthy of accommodation, even though I am wholly

convinced of the worth of others who seek it.

Seeking accommodation is uncomfortable because those seeking it often receive negative feedback when doing so. Though ultimately I was fortunate to receive positive feedback from the coordinators of the “Rethinking Disability on Screen Symposium”, during the interval in which I awaited word on my accommodations I was humbled. I was humbled by the nerves I felt waiting to hear whether or not I was deemed worthy of accommodation. I was humbled by the intricacy and fatigue endemic to the choreography of the dance of accommodation. I do not identify as a person with a disability, nor as a person who requires accommodation on a regular basis, and thus I was humbled by a newfound perspective on those who engage in this dance on an ongoing basis. I had to accommodate myself to being accommodated, and I was humbled.

**Review of Polly Price, “Infecting the Body Politic: Observations on Health Security and the ‘Undesirable’ Immigrant”**

Rabia Belt, Stanford Law School

*[Rabia Belt was a recent recipient of the DHA’s graduate travel scholarship.—Ed.]*

It’s perhaps only fitting that Polly Price, a law professor at Emory, wrote “Infecting the Body Politic: Observations on Health Security and the ‘Undesirable Immigrant,’”<sup>1</sup> given that Emory Hospital faced protests after admitting Ebola patients from West Africa. Her piece was written for a Symposium on Statelessness and Belonging that occurred at the height of the Ebola frenzy in the United States. As Price points out, Ebola paranoia is part of a longstanding dynamic in which the United States restricts immigration and even temporary migration on health grounds based on dubious public policy and declarations of national sovereignty.

Price usefully gives us the term “health security,” which she defines as “the need to sustain a general level of mental as well as physical health in the public,” a need that is claimed as a prerogative of state self-preservation. Price juxtaposes two scenarios in which the United States has historically closed its borders to particular people in the name of health security: global governance of pandemic disease such as Ebola and management of migrants with mental disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2538187](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2538187)

Nations typically assert their preference for migrants of ideal health over undesirable migrants of poor health or disability as part of their sovereign right to restrict migration. This preference is driven by concerns over risk management, such as avoiding pandemic diseases, and the assumption of burdens, like declining people dependent upon public welfare benefits. Price's article, through its linkage of domestic and international law and politics, demonstrates how health security is used both as justification and cover for national self-interest with respect to immigrants. Where in the case of contagious disease at least there is a discrete condition, her treatment of the history of mental disability illustrates that it was a conveniently malleable label used to expel undesirables.

Price argues that the Ebola outbreak exposed the weakness of international structures that might otherwise push back against U.S. policy. Nations have nearly unfettered authority over management of migration based on health. Despite the entreaties of international bodies to keep borders open, the U.S. quarantined people out of short-sighted self-interest. For instance, international law does not recognize a "right to travel" between nations. The United States overrode treaty obligations out of national self-interest through widespread bans on migration, even for treatment. For the first time since a 2011 resolution about HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Security Council addressed infectious disease; they described the Ebola outbreak as a "threat to international peace and security" and asked member states to remove travel and border restrictions. The UN created the first-ever emergency health mission. The World Health Organization warned against "geographic quarantine," or the banning of travel from an entire region, while calling for preventing infected people from traveling. Nonetheless, the United States attempted to seal off West African countries in an effort to block the disease from arriving at their doorstep. In the absence of law, Price contends, what really determines the global governance of disease is "disease diplomacy": incentives, diplomacy, and most significantly, money. The international community did not have enough of any of these elements to persuade powerful actors such as the United States to budge. Self-interested health security trumped the ethos of international community.

Unlike people with contagious diseases, migrants with mental disabilities have no overarching international law framework to help them and no international organization to advocate on their behalf. Instead of fearing the risk of contagion, such as with Ebola, U.S. officials argued that mentally disabled immigrants would become economic burdens upon the state and thus they were justified based on health security to restrict them from entering. Health-based exclusions stretch over U.S. immigration law for over one hundred years. Historically, mental disability restrictions were based

on the likelihood of becoming a public charge. Local communities rooted out poor and disabled nonresidents. The federal system, starting in the 1900s, turned away aspiring migrants for the same reasons. Congress prohibited “idiots” and “lunatics” from immigrating, starting with the Immigration Act of 1891.

While restrictions on other grounds such as homosexuality and race have received abundant scholarly attention and public outrage, mental disability restrictions have been overlooked by scholarly and popular audiences alike according to Price. Currently, mental disorder continues as a restriction, based on a hazily defined threat to public safety. Price’s article is a welcome clarion call that brings attention to this appalling fact.

Price provides a welcome international framework to a topic that stretches beyond the United States. Its historical analysis and critical lens has much to contribute to scholars of public health and psychiatry. While the U.S. government often ignored the insights of public health practitioners and psychiatrists when officials crafted policy, these professions also reaped the benefits of the increased attention and resources that were deployed in the name of curbing contagion or restricting disabled migrants. Also, race and health scholars can note this as a striking example of how racial and ethnic stereotypes continue to affect public health decisions on a vast scale. The Ebola outbreak triggered fears about a diseased Africa infecting the West, while, as Price notes, government officials believed that “backwards” countries such as Ireland were dumping their most undesirable inhabitants in the United States. It is not an accident that these areas were ripe for restriction, and the intertwining stories of racial formation and understanding of disease and disability are fertile ground for exploration. Price has given us a provocative story of health security and the law, and offers historians and policy makers rich case studies illustrating these broader dynamics of international migration and injustice.

### **Telling the Invalid Corps Story**

Day al-Mohamed

It's July 1864 and Confederate General Jubal Early is at the gates of Washington DC. The city is in panic. Almost every able-bodied soldier from the Union has already been sent south with General Grant for the siege of Petersburg. The only defenders remaining are clerks, government officials, and the Invalid Corps.

Created in 1863, the Invalid Corps was made up of men who had been "disabled by wounds or by disease contracted in the line of duty" - men missing limbs, and eyes, those with rheumatism, epilepsy, bullet injuries, those with what we would now call PTSD, and many others. These men, these invalids, were to serve as guards in cities, escort prisoners of war, provide security for railroads and supply depots freeing up able-bodied men to fight at the front.

And now these "invalids" are all that stand between General Early's 15,000 fighting men, and Washington City.

### **Telling the Story**

Hi, I'm Day Al-Mohamed and I'm here to ask you to join me in making a film about the Invalid Corps. Today, there are more than 53 million people with disabilities in the United States. There are almost 3.5 million injured veterans. That adds up to 1 in 5 Americans with a disability. We all know someone. So really, the story of the Invalid Corps is OUR history. Let's bring them out of the shadows for the recognition and honor they deserve!

We only have 30 days. If you can donate, please do! But even if you can't, check out the [web pages](#), talk about the [Kickstarter](#). Share it. Tweet it. Tell your friends. Tell your family. Tell random strangers if you want.

We've got an amazing team and hope you'll be a part of it. Together, let's make this film!

Sincerely,

Day Al-Mohamed and the Invalid Corps Team

*[The Kickstarter for the Invalid Corps documentary project ends 19 November 2015.—  
Ed.]*

## Planning an Exhibition: A Guide for Historians

David Turner

*[This essay originally appeared on the Disability and Industrial Society blog, on 5 October 2015, <http://www.dis-ind-soc.org.uk/en/blog.htm?id=53> Visit the original blog to see related images. Thanks to David Turner for allowing us to reprint it in our newsletter. –Ed.]*

As *From Pithead to Sickbed* ends its run at the National Waterfront Museum, it's time to reflect on our experiences in putting on an exhibition. Designing an exhibition was a new experience for most of us on the project and required thinking differently about the past and how it is presented. So what have we learned?

**1. Get help from the professionals!** We've been very lucky in the amount of help and interest we've received from curators at the National Waterfront Museum, particularly the Director, Steph Mastoris, and Exhibitions and Programmes Officer, Jacqui Roach. The exhibition was the product of three years of planning during which the academic team liaised with the Museum at every stage via regular meetings of our Public Engagement Panel. Knowing from the outset what the Museum expected in terms of the number and text length of panels, and keeping the curators abreast of the findings of our academic research, made for a productive dialogue about what to include in the exhibition and how it could be presented to the public. Being clear right from the start about what kind of information our panels should include and what artefacts might be available meant that we had realistic expectations about what we could display. The Museum has supported us in producing the panels, transporting artefacts and producing the touring version of the exhibition, which will travel to new venues in the coming years.

Effective partnerships are vital to achieving impact. The Museum has also been very helpful in calculating visitor numbers, assisting with evaluation by seeking feedback from visitors and measuring 'dwell time' on particular panels to see how visitors moved around the exhibition, and in producing educational resources which will allow our research to be used by schools to support various parts of the Key Stage 2 curriculum.

**2. Keep things simple!** The big challenge of communicating academic research in an exhibition is finding a means of conveying complex, sometimes contradictory, research findings in a simple format. Each of our 14 panels had to get its message across in just 150 words. Within that limit we had to explain how responses to disability in the coal



industry changed over time and reflect the diversity of experiences of miners themselves – no easy task! Rather than taking a chronological approach, we decided to present the exhibition in terms of a ‘journey’, taking visitors from the accidents that caused injury and impairment, through social, political and medical responses, to the longer term outcomes – including in some cases return to work. Our panel texts highlighted some important developments, such as the rise of workmen’s compensation and the development of rehabilitation, but we supplemented this by including a timeline (including events outside the history of disability or coal) to help visitors to locate the exhibition temporally. The combination of text and image on each panel was important – while you can say little in 150 words, using some interesting images (or photographs of documents) helps to broaden out the topic and include things you might not be able to include in the text. This being an interdisciplinary project, we made sure that many panels included brief excerpts from literary texts, which also helped to reflect the diverse representations and experiences of disability.

**3. Find some interesting objects!** This may seem obvious, but finding the right artefacts can be a challenge, as we found out. Finding materials that were related directly to disability and mining and that were in a fit condition to be moved or displayed took a good deal of research by Mike and Dan, the project Research Fellows. The best artefact on disability and mining held by the Museum – a wooden leg provided for an amputee miner in the early twentieth century – could not be moved to our exhibition space. However, we were lucky enough to borrow a ‘trambulance’ from the Big Pit Museum, a calliper from Llandough Hospital and the manuscript of Bert Coombs’s autobiography, *These Poor Hands*, from the Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University. The manuscript required some conservation work before it could be displayed, which thankfully our exhibition budget was able to fund. If you are planning an exhibition involving the display of books or documents it is important to discuss conservation issues with archivists and librarians first and make sure that these are covered in your budget. Because there weren’t too many artefacts in the Museum’s collection that we could display we made our own, commissioning a replica version of a Miners Friendly Society banner, which hung proudly over the staircase at the entrance to the exhibition. In choosing exhibits we wanted to get a balance between those items like the trambulance, which represented a functional response to mining accidents, with items which had a more individual quality. A crochet of a battleship made by miner George Preece, who took to needlecraft after losing his legs in an accident, was one of my favourite artefacts in the exhibition. Using it broadened the definition of ‘disability things’ to include not just the usual medical or assistive devices associated with disability, but also items made by disabled people with more personal value.

**4. Make it accessible!** We consulted local disability groups Swansea Access for Everyone and the Swansea Disability Forum for advice on making the exhibition accessible and relevant to all. We took advice on the font size for the texts of panels and made sure that we had Braille and large print versions of the text available for people with visual impairments. As the exhibition included a listening post (with excerpts from literary sources) and a 1940s film about a miners' rehabilitation centre, we ensured that transcripts and subtitles were available. In addition, we recorded a series of podcasts about the exhibition. The idea for these was partly inspired by Amanda Cachia's presentation, 'Disabling the Museum' at the Awkward Bastards symposium organised by Disability Arts Shropshire (DASH) in March 2015. Amanda talked about 'creative access', a process where she had worked with disabled users to create audio guides to exhibitions, making objects accessible to others, but also adding their own interpretations, moving away from the authoritative voice of Museum interpretation. Although our podcasts weren't intended as formal audio descriptions (they don't discuss all the objects and panels in the exhibition), they do provide a means of capturing ways in which different people engage with objects in the exhibition and use the exhibition to reflect on their own experiences and on issues relevant today.

An exhibition on disability history necessarily needs to be as accessible as possible. But just as disability history isn't just of interest to disabled people, so exhibits on other topics should be made accessible to all. Public engagement is about making work physically accessible as well as making it understandable and relevant to a wider audience. True engagement – a mutually beneficial dialogue between academics and the public – cannot take place if some people are excluded from the conversation. Disability historians can take the lead in promoting accessibility of research across the whole of the historical profession, not just in our own field.

Seeing the exhibition 'in the flesh' has been one of my proudest moments as project director. It is a testament to the hard work of our colleagues at the Waterfront Museum, and to that of our fantastic project research team, especially Mike, Dan and Alex who chose the artefacts, literary texts and wrote the panels. And none of it would have been possible without the generous support of the Wellcome Trust. Sad as it is to see the exhibition come to an end in Swansea, I'm looking forward to seeing it again at National Library of Wales when it opens there on 19th December.