

Covering a 100-year period in the history of the social policy and practice toward people with severe mental retardation, *Abandoned to Their Fate* looks at the lives of people once labeled idiots, hopeless, or unteachable. Ferguson examines what he terms chronicity, the definition of some of the disabled population as beyond successful treatment or training that would make them suitable for reentry into daily life. The government, physicians, and families faced the quandary of what to do with people categorized as feebleminded. Those who failed to respond to education or treatment were institutionalized, kept isolated except for contact with others like themselves, and simply left to a fate of neglect and exclusion. This book centers on a typical facility in New York. The Rome State Custodial Asylum for Unteachable Idiots (later the Rome Developmental Center) adopted a system of custodialism that is representative of the pattern of care provided by most American institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the treatments lauded in the supposed golden age of progressive reform are challenged by Ferguson as popular myths. Even with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the federal policy of deinstitutionalization, Ferguson contends that the lives of many disabled people, particularly those with severe or multiple disabilities, have not significantly improved. Concluding that for most people in the United States reform has yet to arrive, he draws clear connections between the policy and reform initiatives of the past and present.

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