Dr Breda Carty traces a history of disability through the State Library's collections

Those of us who have an interest in disability are regularly frustrated by the scant attention it receives in most of our histories. Not only do people with disabilities tend to be absent, the narratives about our lives and the social developments that affect us are often over-simplified or distorted. As one scholar recently fulminated, “Australian history continues to be a collusion of myth-making when it erases or ignores the lives and experiences of Australians with disability. A truly ‘big picture’ Australian history would bring these lives and experiences out of the shadows” (McDonald, 2013).

As the C. H. Currey Memorial Fellow at the State Library of NSW during 2017, my project is to explore some of the historical resources which might help us to challenge that absence and bring the lives and perspectives of people with disabilities into the foreground. It can be easy to assume that people with disabilities have been largely sidelined until recently, when the National Disability Insurance Scheme is conferring some visibility. In reality of course, we’ve always been present. People with disabilities and their families have been resourceful and creative participants in some of the formative developments in Australian history. We have also been restricted in unique ways from participation in society and these restrictions have been powerful indicators of the limitations of social institutions and family resources. “Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write” (Baynton, 2001, p. 52). It’s everywhere in the State Library of NSW collections too!

One example of the riches within the State Library’s collections is a set of two boxes of photograph albums, scrapbooks, and a short autobiography of James Thomas Wrench. Wrench was born in 1868 and grew up in the small town of Sofala, near Bathurst in NSW. He died in 1899 in Brisbane. He was born without arms, and with no knee or little toe on his right leg (he may have had a form of phocomelia). He learned to write and paint with his feet, and was a published author and artist. His autobiography, written as a young adult, is a most engaging document, and offers many insights into both the restrictions and possibilities for a person with a physical disability in mid nineteenth century rural Australia. It also shows how much historical evidence there is to support many of our current understandings and legislative provisions for people with disability.

We know what a crucial difference it makes for children with disabilities if their families are accepting and offer practical and psychological support. James Wrench’s parents and seven siblings always included him and encouraged his social participation, learning and artistic work – “[they] were thankful to God to see me live and prosper”. His father adapted a perambulator to make a kind of very early wheelchair, and his siblings pushed him around in this wherever practicable. Wrench makes it clear that this familial support was essential for his achievements.

One of the key pillars of the current Disability Discrimination Act (1992 is “access to premises”. Wrench offers a striking example of the difference this can make. He attended the local school for some years, with his siblings pushing him there in his homemade wheelchair. But as his older siblings grew up and left, he only had one younger sister who was not strong enough to push him in his perambulator to the school. So his school days ended there.

There is a great deal of research evidence today to show that teacher attitudes make an important difference in educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Wrench describes his active and enthusiastic participation in school during two periods when the teacher was “kind”. For another four years of his childhood, however, the school was in the charge of a teacher who was “cruel” to him. He simply stopped going to school for those years.

The terminology we use to describe the experience of people with disability changes throughout history. Wrench refers to himself throughout his autobiography as “afflicted”, and this term was used by other people with disabilities at the time too. It may be considered politically incorrect today, but historical sources such as these remind us that beliefs about language and terminology can be transitory.

There are many potential research directions in the history of people with disabilities in Australia, and collections such as those in the State Library of NSW are goldmines of primary sources. I look forward to the opportunity to continue exploring these during my Fellowship.

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C. H. Currey Memorial Fellow 2017, State Library of NSW

References


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