

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Swansea University
Unit of Assessment: 30 - History
Title of case study: Revealing Disability's Hidden Past: Enriching public discourses and empowering disabled people
1. Summary of the impact

Prize-winning research by Dr David Turner at Swansea University has **enriched public understanding** of the history of disability. He has **empowered disabled people** by showing that they have a history and demonstrated the contemporary relevance of that history in showing that developments considered recent, such as the formation of disabled identities and public fears about the authenticity of disabled welfare claimants, are nothing new. Impact is achieved via the **creation of a major cultural product**, a BBC Radio 4 series 'Disability: A New History' which reached a wide audience, and through **targeted engagement with media, policymakers and campaigners** on disability benefit reform.

2. Underpinning research

a) Context

Since 2006, Turner has undertaken research that examines changing social and cultural attitudes towards disability from the early modern to the modern period, and the impact of shifting cultural meanings of impairment on the experiences of disabled persons themselves. Turner's work is part of the burgeoning international field of Disability History in which Swansea University has emerged as a significant UK centre, thanks to major externally funded projects led by Turner, Professor Anne Borsay, Dr Irina Metzler and Professor Patricia Skinner. Turner received an AHRC Fellowship Award, 'Imagining Disability in the long Eighteenth-Century: Physical Impairment in England 1660-1830' which ran from December 2010 to September 2011. The findings of the research were published in a monograph, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (Routledge, 2012), the first book-length study of physical disability in Georgian England. The book won the Disability History Association Outstanding Publication Award in 2012 for the best book published worldwide in English 2010-12 on any aspect of Disability History.

b) Nature of research insights:

Several key findings of Turner's research undertaken as part of the AHRC Fellowship and published in the book relate to the impact claimed in this case study:

- i. Turner's research is focussed on changing definitions of 'disability' itself, showing how concepts of 'disability' and 'able-bodiedness' changed from narrow, socially specific categories to the more universal labels we understand today. This finding underpinned the BBC series, the first episode of which examined historical definitions of disability to show the historical contingency of the term.
- ii. His work has challenged popular stereotypes that people in the past lacked understanding of disability or empathy, showing how eighteenth-century attitudes were a complex mix of mockery, sympathy and genuine admiration. This was a theme examined throughout the BBC series and was the starting point for its re-interpretation of disability in history, challenging the assumption that the lot of disabled people in the past was invariably miserable.
- iii. Turner's research has gone further than previous work in the field in expanding the range of source materials for disability history, drawing on sermons, jokes, medical texts, periodicals, prints, popular and elite correspondence and criminal court records. A key feature of the BBC series was its demonstration that disabled people were everywhere in the past by including readings from an innovative range of source materials furnished by Turner's work.
- iv. In the process, he has focussed attention on the voices of disabled people themselves, exploring the formation of disabled identities. The BBC series foregrounded personal

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testimonies including those of subjects studied in Turner's book, such as the MP William Hay and artist Matthew Buchinger.

- v. The research demonstrated that concerns about the 'fraudulent' presentation of disabilities to claim support were a long-standing media obsession, related to cultural perceptions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' types of disability rather than a significant culture of deception. In order to give these findings a clearer policy perspective, Turner summarised them in a policy paper for *History and Policy*, an online open-access forum designed to connect historians with media and policymakers by making previously peer-reviewed research available in an accessible format focussed on contemporary political issues.

- c) **Key researcher:** Dr David Turner; appointed to Swansea University as Senior Lecturer, 2005; promoted to Reader, 2012.

3. References to the research**a) Publications:**

D. Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) [Monograph 90,000 words. Reviewed at proposal stage by 5 reviewers].

b) Research grants:

D. Turner (PI), 'Imagining Disability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Physical Impairment in England 1660-1830', AHRC Fellowship award, awarded August 2010, £64,751 fEC; project dates 13 December 2010 – 12 September 2011. Peer reviewed by academic reviewers at grant application stage.

4. Details of the impact

a) The most significant means by which Turner's research **enhanced public understanding** was through the creation and response to a ten-part series 'Disability: A New History' for BBC Radio 4, a collaboration between Turner, production company Loftus Media and the BBC's Disability Affairs Correspondent who presented it (C1).

Turner collaborated with the producer to develop the idea for a series intended to get disability out of a broadcasting ghetto and into the popular mainstream by showing the richness of its pre-twentieth century history. Whereas the BBC TV series *The Disabled Century* (1999) had looked at changing attitudes to disability in Britain since 1914, no series on radio or TV had ever examined disability before this period in a sustained way. Turner was actively involved in the lengthy commissioning process, helping to write the prospectus for the series and accompanying the producer to a meeting with the Commissioning Editor, General Factual Programmes at BBC Radio 4, and was subsequently appointed academic adviser on the project. The series was collaborative, involving interviews with Turner and 13 other historians who contributed additional insights from their own research. However, during the development and recording of the series (September 2012-April 2013) Turner made a unique contribution in designing the content of each episode with the producer, using his research to provide sources for readings in 8 of the 10 programmes, providing expert interviews used in 4 programmes, using his knowledge and standing in the field to find other contributors, and guiding the historical interpretation and accuracy of the script, with the production team using his book as their primary historical reference.

Turner's research thus had a significant impact in **creating a new cultural product**, influencing the production in terms of content and interpretation. Turner's research was instrumental in providing a variety of new sources read by actors that would surprise and challenge the audience, including advertisements for medical products, jokes, testimonies of freak show performers, and in leading the team to sources where disabled people spoke for themselves. The producer writes that

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Turner's research 'was invaluable in shaping the series, and both the presenter and I drew on his book both as background and to provide materials, e.g., readings for the series', and that '**this Radio 4 series would never have happened if I had not met and interviewed David Turner**' whose '*authority and standing as a historian – particularly his recent book *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England* were **crucial to having the series commissioned by Radio 4***'. She writes that Turner's contribution has '**made me think in a new way about how we define disability, not just in the past but now**'. The BBC Disability Affairs Correspondent commented that the series had given him '*a number of new perspectives ... not least the doubt much of the research sheds on the idea that we are making perpetual progress in our attitudes to disability*' (C2).

The series was broadcast weekdays at 1.45 pm between 27th May and 7th June 2013 in a popular slot which gave its impact on enriching public discourses of disability a **wide reach**. (C3) The series attracted much discussion in the press and social media. On Twitter several disability campaigners and organisations such as Remploi debated questions raised by the series, such as whether disabled performers in the eighteenth century were exploited or entrepreneurs – a theme addressed by Turner in an interview contribution to episode 3 and in an article for the BBC Ouch! Disability blog (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-ouch-22637045>). Some in the disability community tweeted about how the series had **empowered** them by allowing them to imagine their lives through the ages. The *Daily Telegraph* (29 May 2013) marvelled at the '**surprising amount of documentary evidence**' revealed by the series, while the *Observer* (2 June 2013) noted how the series **created a new kind of history** because '*the disabled have never really featured in our stories of ourselves*' (4). The series identified Turner as the expert to contact to find out more about disability history. He received letters from members of the public including from a woman who had heard his account of the limbless artist Matthew Buchinger in episode 3 who sought his advice on donating a previously unknown engraving by the artist in her possession to a public repository, and from a successful popular novelist asking for advice on writing about disability in her forthcoming novel.

b) Turner's work has also **contributed to public discourse about disability and welfare reform** via an article, "'Fraudulent" Disability in Historical Perspective' published by *History and Policy* on 14th February 2012 to coincide with the debate of the Welfare Reform Bill in the House of Lords (<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-130.html>). Whilst public debate on welfare had drawn on historical precedents before, there had been little discussion of the period before the nineteenth century in general - or which addressed disability in particular - prior to Turner's intervention.

The piece had immediate impact, leading to an article published on the BBC News Wales website which forced a Department of Work and Pensions spokesman to defend the integrity of government policy (C5). The impact of Turner's work is evident in terms of its **reach**, with the BBC News article shared 78 times on Twitter by political organisations, disability activists and anti-cuts campaigners. Feedback from the public included '*interesting and thought-provoking article about our attitudes towards disability*' and several respondents indicated how the research had **enriched the vocabulary of political debate** highlighting how the early modern term 'clapperdodgeon' showed that the stigmatising of welfare claimants was not new (C6). Turner's research findings were also reported in the *Western Mail* on 20 February 2012 with a response from the policy officer of Disability Rights UK on how government policy was increasing public hostility to disabled people (C7). Turner did a 30 minute live interview on BBC Radio Wales Jamie and Louise Show (28 February 2012) and was interviewed by BBC Kent (21 February 2012) in a feature on a family about to lose state benefits for their disabled son. The **impetus given to disability rights campaigns** is evident in Turner's article being recommended by various voluntary sector organisations, including links on the Facebook pages of Disability Wales, ACT NOW, Autism Campaigners together, and the Benefits Helpline website. Turner published a follow-up opinion piece for *History and Policy* (http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion/opinion_96.html) to coincide with the London 2012 Paralympics, which was described by the CEO of Scope, as a '*very interesting piece*' (C8).

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For disabled people the research was significant in showing that they have allies who were able to articulate their concerns using historical evidence. One person facing reassessment of their benefits wrote of Turner that '*we need the help of people like yourself and your colleagues*' to highlight the struggles affecting disabled people (C9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- (1) 'Disability: A New History'. Loftus Media production for BBC Radio 4. 10 episodes (plus 2 omnibus editions) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b021mdwt> (accessed 7 August 2013).
- (2) Email testimony provided by the series producer, Loftus Media, and the Disability Affairs Correspondent, BBC.
- (3) BBC quarterly audience, download and AI information provided via Loftus Media and BBC and submitted to REF, but redacted from this published version due to confidentiality.
- (4) Loftus Media Storify of reaction to the series: <http://storify.com/LoftusMedia/disability-a-new-history> (accessed 7 August 2013).
- (5) Benefit Cheats: David Turner on 'history of distrust of disability', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-17067379> (accessed 7 August 2013).
- (6) <http://topsy.com/www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-17067379> (accessed 7 August 2013).
- (7) 'Obsession with "Benefit Scroungers" is not new', *Western Mail*, Monday 20th February 2012, p. 13.
- (8) Twitter: CEO Scope tweet to David Turner (@DrDavidMT) and *History and Policy*, (@HistoryPolicy), 13 September 2012.
- (9) Email from member of the public to one of *History and Policy's* founding partners, 18 February 2012, commenting on Turner's article.