

White, W. (2004). Foreword. Lobdell, J. *This Strange Illness: Alcoholism and Bill W.*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter Publishing.

## Introduction

Jared Lobdell's *This Strange Illness of Mind, Body and Spirit* is an important book that arrives at an important time in the history of alcoholism. There is a darkness that this book seeks to illuminate. That darkness comes not from the toll alcoholism exacts on individuals, families and communities, which is exorbitant, but from the stigma and shadows within which this disorder continues to be shrouded.

For more than two centuries, America has vacillated between compassion and contempt in her response to alcoholism and the alcoholic. A reform movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries conceptualized chronic drunkenness (inebriety) as a disease and generated a network of American inebriate homes and asylums. This movement collapsed in the early twentieth century as America lost faith in the potential for recovery and briefly courted the idea that alcoholism could be resolved by legally banishing the seed from which it was thought to grow.

In the mid-twentieth century, a "modern alcoholism movement" rose from the ashes of prohibition to again claim that alcoholism was a disease and that the alcoholic was a sick person who should be treated rather than punished. The image of the alcoholic as skid row wino was replaced by an image of the alcoholic as one's family member, neighbor, and co-worker. This movement peaked in the 1970s as federal and state legislation dotted the American landscape with alcoholism treatment programs. Stereotypes (the alcoholic as the skid row wino) and stigma declined as Americans from all walks of life, including First Lady Betty Ford, stepped out of the shadows to declare their successful and sustained recovery from alcoholism.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the erosion of the modern alcoholism movement. The core concept of alcoholism gave way to chemical dependency, substance abuse, and addiction—concepts that first merged alcoholism and illicit drug dependence and then added a host of other problems within their rubric. The commercialization of these broadened concepts by a rapidly expanding private treatment industry and the ensuing abuses within that industry led to a financial backlash that eroded insurance coverage for alcoholism and led to the closure of many treatment programs.

There was also an ideological backlash that challenged the core ideas of the modern alcoholism movement. This counter-movement proclaimed: 1) addiction is a myth, 2) excessive alcohol and drug consumption is a choice, not a disease, 3) Alcoholics Anonymous and alcoholism/addiction treatment are ineffective and potentially harmful, and 4) addiction treatment is a failed social experiment that should be de-funded.

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that alcoholism and the broader cluster of problems with which it was now grouped were being restigmatized, demedicalized and recriminalized. Severe alcohol and other drug-related problems were again being described within the province of morality rather than medicine; cultural ownership of these problems shifted from systems of care to systems of punishment and control. This trend has triggered the rise of a new recovery advocacy movement—grassroots organizations of recovering people and their families and allies who are seeking to change public attitudes and public policies by offering themselves as living proof of the reality and fruits of long-term recovery from alcoholism and other addictions. There is in this movement a recognition that the achievements and lessons of the modern alcoholism movement could be lost. It is in this context that Jared Lobdell's new book arrives. But it has not arrived

alone.

There is an increased interest in the history of alcoholism and recovery, as evidenced by the publication of new books on the history of A.A. and Twelve Step recovery (*The Collected Ernie Kurtz*), A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson (*Bill W.*; *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson*), key A.A. figures (*How It Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder*; *Mrs. Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous*; and *Silkworth: The Little Doctor who Loved Drunks*), and the larger story of treatment and recovery (*Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*). Also in evidence is a dramatic increase in history-themed conferences related to addiction and recovery. This is the context in which Jared Lobdell's *This Strange Illness of Mind, Body and Spirit* arrives.

Lobdell's expansive essay contributes five things. First, it provides a sweeping narrative of the history of alcoholism and our social and therapeutic responses to it. Second, it recounts the history of Alcoholics Anonymous and how this fellowship came to conceptualize alcoholism as a disease of the mind, body and spirit. Third, it explores the long history of alcoholism typologies—efforts to describe varying patterns of alcoholism and their etiological roots. Fourth, it details in successive chapters what we know about the psychological, biological and spiritual dimensions of alcoholism and explicates the history and content of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. The concluding chapter (entitled “Paradigm Regained”) attempts to define that which must not be lost from both the collective experience of alcoholism recovery and the scientific study of alcoholism.

A growing number of observers believe that the backlash against the foundational ideas of the modern alcoholism movement and the backlash in response to abuses within the addiction treatment industry threaten to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” Lobdell's *This Strange Illness of Mind, Body and Spirit* seeks to remind us of what must not be forgotten. It marks the beginning of a new genre of literature that seeks to define and save the best within the modern history of alcoholism recovery. That effort alone makes this book a worthy contribution.