

Licking Disability: Reflections on the Politics of Postage Stamps

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Over the past decade and a half, scholars of film, television, and photography, even of the Internet, have increasingly turned to visual representations of disability as sites at which to engage popular and commercial perceptions of disabled people, as well as the limits of disabled identity. How might examining postage stamps contribute to understanding the visual culture of disability and the (literal) circulation of disability themes in national and international discourses of health care, employment, or individual rights? Are postage stamps public documents and, therefore, subject to the same scrutiny as other artifacts of public history?

In the interest of recovering the historical and political dimensions of disability, the authors have assembled a collection of international postage stamps produced to make public a variety of disability-related themes, not least of which is the ongoing effort to represent disabled people as visible and active participants within the political and economic lives of the nations they represent. Nearly every country has issued stamps commemorating campaigns to cure, rehabilitate, and honor persons with disabilities. As historical artifacts, though, commemorative stamps serve as rich if unexamined sources for further research into the way disability has been portrayed by different countries of the world over many decades. In addition, they serve as documentary evidence of the scope of disabilities that have received public attention and changed public consciousness.

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The following pages are devoted to an exploration of disability themes by several scholars, all of whom offer postage stamps as catalysts for further research, rather than making conclusive interpretations of the images and nations involved or the historical or political contexts in which the stamps were originally created. Thus these reflections serve to illuminate a small part of this history and to encourage further reliance on postage stamps as historical artifacts.

Australian People with Disabilities

On July 13, 1995, the Australia Post issued two stamps picturing people with disabilities engaged in ordinary activities. The first stamp, showing a child with cerebral palsy flying a kite, commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Spastic Centre of New South Wales. The Spastic Centre of the Sydney Harbor suburb of Mosman was the first in the world to offer parents, free of charge, a comprehensive education, treatment, and training for their children with cerebral palsy. The founders and organizers of the center were Neil and Audrie McLeod, who determined that their daughter, Jenny, born with cerebral palsy in 1938, would lead a full and normal life. Eleanor Schonell (1902–60), an international authority on the education of the child with cerebral palsy, described the Spastic Centre



as the most comprehensive she had seen in any part of the world. The entire project was carried out by voluntary donations of money, materials, and labor from Australian citizens and charitable organizations. Interestingly, from 1954 until 2000, considerable financial support for the center came from the Miss Australia Quest pageant. Generating extensive publicity, the young women aspiring to be Miss Australia raised over \$90 million in

support of the fund and generated extensive publicity for the cause of education for children with cerebral palsy.

The second stamp, which shows a blind child playing a violin, commemorates the centenary of the founding of the Victorian Foundation for the Blind. Australia was one of the first countries to establish special schools for children with visual impairment and to introduce music education as an important part of the curriculum. The blind teacher, poet, and philanthropist Matilda “Tilly” Aston (1873–1947) founded the organization, originally called the Victorian Association for the Advancement of the Blind, in 1895, and was one of several outstanding advocates, who were themselves blind, for improved education of the blind in Australia. After a chance visit from Thomas James, a blind missionary and home teacher of the blind, young Tilly Aston moved from her country birthplace Carisbrook to Melbourne, where she attended the Melbourne Institute for the Blind. Determined to

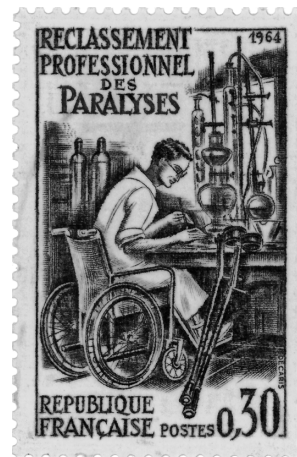
lead an independent life, Aston eventually entered the University of Melbourne, but had to discontinue her studies for the lack of available Braille textbooks. She later established the Association for the Advancement of the Blind and became its secretary. As well as organizing a group of Braille transcribers, the association successfully lobbied for the world's first free postal delivery of Braille material. At forty, Aston qualified as a teacher and later became head of the Victorian School for the Blind, a position she held until ill health caused her to retire in 1925. She continued her work as an advocate until her death in 1947.

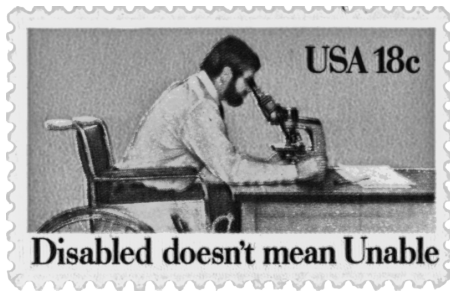


International Stamps and Productive Citizenship

We know less about the stories behind the following collage of stamps. They were submitted for the perusal of *RHR* readers by J. Douglass Klein, who has been sorting through a vast stamp collection belonging to his late father, Philip S. Klein, an emeritus professor of history at the Pennsylvania State University. Klein, who is not a collector himself, has begun to speculate on the history of these stamps, which represent only a tiny portion of his father's extensive collection.

The emphasis on rehabilitation as it relates to productive labor (and, consequently, productive citizenship) is a recurring theme of the postage stamps created by industrial nations, such as the 1960 U.S. stamp featuring an older worker in a wheelchair (who may or may not be a veteran) operating a drill press, or the 1972 Australian stamp of a male amputee undergoing vocational training. Yet read in the postindustrial era, such images are perhaps more historically complex: the 1964 French stamp calling for the “professional reclassification of the paralyzed,” for example, bears a strong relationship to the 1981 U.S. stamp that exhorts the viewer to recognize that “disabled doesn't mean unable,” suggesting that both workers are involved in skilled technical work. The move from the drill press to the microscope in two





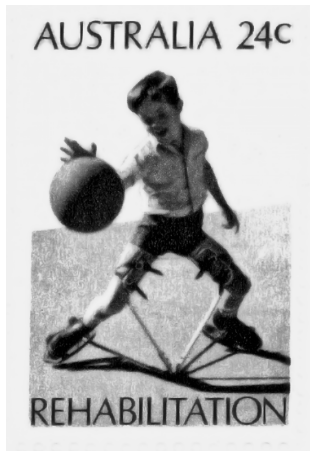
decades, one could argue, represents not only a cumulative shift from rehabilitating the disabled for physical labor to preparing them for mental labor but also parallels the cumulative postwar shift, within advanced economies, from industrial knowledge to information-based knowledge as a marker of one's social contribution.

The recurring theme of sports on some postage stamps suggests that the disabled can be understood as productive, active citizens when depicted in normative athletic pursuits, such as basketball or archery, even as shifts in employment and economic opportunities for workers have deemphasized physical labor. Like many popular representations of disabled individuals in popular culture, such stamps feature images of what some disability activists have called the “super-crip” or “spectacular disabled”: that is, individuals whose triumph over the limitations of physical disability enable them to perform superhuman feats or participate in activities associated with “normal” and, typically, gender-



specific social rituals. The 1972 German stamp for the World Games in Heidelberg, for example, strongly resembles the Canadian stamp celebrating the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal in its depiction of men whose upper body strength does not compromise their virility and enables them to participate in the masculine world of crossbow competition.

Children feature prominently on many stamps since nothing promotes the perks of rehabilitation medicine and its potential to create normalcy more than children. In a 1972 Australian stamp a boy in leg braces bounces a ball, imparting a joyful aplomb and energy that is usually absent from popular representations of people with disabilities. A different image emerges from the boy, or girl (who look more like miniature adults than children) under the protective maternal skirts of



a mythic figure of Western medicine in the 1957 U.S. stamp heralding the triumph of the Salk vaccine over polio.

Children were a favorite theme for the stamps issued in 1981 as part of the commemoration of the International Year of the Disabled, one of which was a stamp from Sweden of a dramatically rendered blind boy locating his nation on a tactile globe. By contrast, of the thousands of stamps issued that year, some showed disability without actually showing disabled people. Two stamps, issued in the United Kingdom, depict disembodied (deaf) hands signing and disembodied feet painting rainbows, suggesting that, however earnest the intention, strategies for representing disability in public contexts can both challenge visual stereotypes of disabled people, as well as contribute to their virtual disappearance. Whether we are reading too much into that analysis or not remains to be seen. What is apparent is that, properly contextualized, postage stamps are a rich primary source for historical research.

