

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue by Rab Houston and Uta Frith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Available in the local library.

Bishop Gordon reviews a fascinating book which was recommended to him by John Womersley, a retired doctor in Kirkcudbright.

This is the true story of an early eighteenth-century Scotsman called Hugh Blair, who was born with what we would now call autism. His family were middle-class, owning (and living in) Borgue House and a large estate around it, together with Rusco (now Rusko) north of the present-day Gatehouse of Fleet.

Autism is a modern word, and poor Hugh was known as “the daft lad of Borgue.” He took little notice of social conventions, eating his meals when he felt like it (rather than at table with the family) and allowing the animals to eat off his plate. He had a particular fondness for funerals, often walking great distances to attend them. He was very good indeed at learning from others, and quickly grasped the ability to follow their example; but he was less good at seeing the reason for any given activity. Thus he learned how to build dry-stone dykes by watching workers on the estate, but would then build one which went nowhere and served no obvious purpose. He would visit people at inappropriate times, and then wonder why they weren’t more hospitable. But he bore no grudges, and seems to have had a gentle and kindly temperament.

The reason we know so much about Hugh Blair is because he became the subject of a court case brought by his younger brother. As the oldest male, Hugh was due to inherit the family estates. But when he married the daughter of the Kirkcudbright surgeon, his brother argued that he was not fit to marry (and thus not to inherit either) and took the case all the way to the Court of Session in Edinburgh in 1747. The local minister agreed with Hugh’s brother, and so did the Court, which declared the marriage null and void. But Hugh and his wife took no notice: they refused to separate, and continued to live happily together: later they proved their detractors wrong by giving birth to (and bringing up) two children before Hugh died in 1765.

Although contemporaries described Hugh as “daft” he seems to have been generally liked and even loved and valued: the authors of this remarkable and moving story conclude that “people living in 1750 in Kirkcudbright were in many respects not so different from people today” (p174). And they make two other important observations: first, they say that autistic people are not mad or weird: rather, they “truly look at the world differently. They have different minds.” (p118). And they conclude that “society is challenged and humbled by the sheer existence of people who are unmoved by values that it takes for granted” (p169).

We may have more to learn than we think from those who see the world differently from ourselves, and the story of Hugh Blair is both a challenge and an invitation to remember that.