Portrait of W.N.; aged 6 (artist unknown, c. 1840)

This is Plate LXXXIII of Sir Alexander Morison’s 1840 book The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases. The picture is a sensitively drawn portrait of a child. The text reads:

“This boy has been idiotic since birth; his mother says that he became more so at three years of age, after measles and whooping cough. His head appears to be well formed; he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels, and he can repeat a few words such as – mother and poor boy; he is attentive to the calls of nature, sleeps well and seldom wets his bed . . . he sometimes makes attempts to imitate others singing; he appears to have affection for his father and mother, and is fond of looking at his father at work as a tailor, claps his hands when he sees the needle move, and tries to imitate the operation of sewing.’

If the picture did not appear in a textbook on mental diseases, there would be no clue that there was anything wrong with the child. This observation could be applied to most of the portraits in Morison’s book – the relation between a patient’s physiognomy and the underlying mental condition was by no means obvious. For a time, though, Morison’s book was influential in psychiatric circles in Britain and Europe. Later in the century, clinicians would become interested in photography and, once again, commission portraits of individual asylum inmates.

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