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Bedlam

Catharine Arnold

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"Bedlam!" The very name, derived from a nickname for the Bethlehem Hospital, conjures up graphic images of naked patients in filthy conditions, or parading untended wards deluded that they are Napoleon or Jesus Christ. This common image of madness can be traced to William Hogarth's 1735 *Rake's Progress* series, which depicts Bedlam as a freak show providing entertainment for Londoners between trips to the zoo, puppet shows, and public executions. That this is still the most powerful image of Bedlam, more than two centuries later, says much about the prevailing attitude to mental illness, although the Bedlam of the popular imagination is long gone. The hospital was relocated to the suburbs of Kent in 1930, and Sydney Smirke's impressive Victorian building in Southwark took on a new role as the Imperial War Museum. Following the historical narrative structure of *Necropolis*, this history examines the capital's treatment of the insane over the centuries, from the founding of Bethlehem Hospital in 1247 through the heyday of the great Victorian asylums to the more enlightened attitudes that prevail today.

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