

## A Perfect Turmoil: Walter E. Fernald and the Struggle to Care for America's Disabled

**Alex Green**

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Alex Green's fascinating book reconstructs the life and legacy of Walter E. Fernald, a polarizing architect in the US's treatment of the mentally disabled.

A physician from Maine who established and influenced institutions across the country for people once called "feeble-minded," Fernald was both a progressive health advocate and a destructive force. Both aspects of Fernald's legacy are explored with assiduous detail, tracing his life with chronological rigor from the beginning of his career as one of the first American physicians to urge surgeons to sterilize their surgical instruments. Later, he played a pivotal role in American policy, diagnoses, and the treatment of mental disabilities.

Delving into an enormous untapped archive of Fernald's documents, the book takes an even-handed view of the complex figure who promoted the idea that disabled children had an adverse moral effect on society and ought to be segregated. He fraternized with proponents of eugenics, too, including Charles Davenport. In addition to such positions, Fernald is shown advocating for the care and education of the disabled, fighting against forced sterilization—even helping to beat Winston Churchill's attempt to enshrine it into law in England—and broadening the diagnosis of disability from the perfunctory eighteenth-century binary of "imbecile" and "idiot."

In encompassing a life that spanned numerous scientific revolutions, this book captures a malleable, fresh sense of history being made. Early reactions to the emergent fields of clinical psychology and genetics are rendered with depth, in efficient prose that gives credence and specificity to historical moments. The book also weaves Fernald's major contemporaries into its narrative well, including Dr. Maria Montessori.

An expansive biography of a man who shaped medical responses to developmental differences, *A Perfect Turmoil* recounts how contemporary ideas and policies around mental disability came into being.

WILLEM MARX (March / April 2025)

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