The child remains a child, whatever his age may be, he has a child’s outlook, a child’s pleasures and expectations. It rests with those responsible for him to decide whether he shall be a happy, good, pure child or a plague-spot upon the face of the earth.¹

In 1892, the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants opened a small home for feeble-minded girls in Hitchin on the basis that young women ‘on the borderland of imbecility’ were ‘liable to be the prey of vicious men or women, and to be dragged down into degradation’.² Two years later, an editorial in the British Medical Journal echoed such fears about the dangers of the feeble-minded by warning that those inhabiting ‘the borderland of imbecility’ were ‘a greater danger to the State, than the absolutely idiotic’, and by stressing the urgent need for institutional provisions designed ‘to provide maintenance, protection, training, and employment for boys and youths who are mentally incapacitated from earning their own living and who are yet so far intelligent as not to be eligible for any asylum for the imbecile or insane’.³ Such a scheme, the editorial suggested, was desirable ‘not only from the point of view of philanthropy, but from that of social economy, for the segregation of those afflicted with feeble-mindedness in special homes would tend to diminish the evil in the next generation, while they would themselves earn something towards their support, and so be less of a burden to the community’.⁴

The naming of ‘the borderland’ in the 1890s marked the emergence of a distinct category of mental defectives, invested for the first time with positive, rather than merely negative, characteristics.⁵ Since the introduction of the category of ‘feeble-mindedness’ to denote a mild degree of deficiency by P. Martin Duncan and William Millard in 1866,⁶ feeble-mindedness had been characterised largely
by the mere absence of imbecility, on the one hand, and educational and social normality, on the other. Although both the Report of the Departmental Committee on Defective and Epileptic Children, published in 1898, and the subsequent Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act of 1899 continued to suspend the feeble-minded rather passively between the normal and the imbecilic, it is clear that during the 1890s and 1900s the borderland was increasingly adorned with a distinctive set of topographical, biological, and historical characteristics. Fashioned within the context of anxieties about rising levels of insanity and deficiency, about the inherited and biological nature of educational and social ineptitude, and about the preservation of national and imperial strength, the feeble-minded (more than any other group of defectives) were perceived as a distinct and pathological ‘class’ in society, with constitutional tendencies to pauperism, criminality, bestiality, promiscuity, and excessive fertility.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the problem of the feeble-minded had become, for some commentators, ‘the most pressing of all the social problems of our time’. Less overtly pathological than idiots and imbeciles, the feeble-minded constituted a covert source of physical, moral, and mental degeneration that was threatening to subvert the health and wealth of the nation. Critically, this rhetoric embodied a prominent belief that social pathology was clearly located in the biological nature of a distinct ‘class’ of the population rather than in socio-economic conditions. Although the productivity of the feeble-minded was understood to be determined in part by the environment in which they lived, the problems thought to be caused by those occupying the borderland of imbecility were inextricably linked to the constitutional and pathological nature of their condition.

During the late Victorian and Edwardian period, then, the feeble-minded occupied a critical social and cognitive space, a ‘borderland’ between the educationally and socially normal and the pathological. Use of ‘the borderland’ as an epithet for the feeble-minded was not coincidental. The term was regularly employed in this period either to describe phenomena that were ambiguously situated between the supposedly pathological and the normal, or to depict conditions and behaviour that lay between, and sometimes served to connect, disparate clinical and social pathologies. Significantly, the feeble-minded occupied borderlands that corresponded to both meanings of the term. In addition to bridging a gap between the mentally normal, on the one hand, and idiots and