During debates on the Feeble-Minded Persons (Control) Bill in 1912, Josiah Wedgwood expressed concerns that legislative provisions to compulsorily detain the feeble-minded would be used primarily to restrict the liberty of women and the working classes. Wedgwood’s objections to legislation proved futile. In 1913, the Mental Deficiency Act invested local authorities with the powers to confine mental defectives in certain circumstances. In spite of contemporary efforts to expose the class and gender assumptions evident in the legislation, historians have paid relatively scant attention to the impact of class and gender (or the interaction between the two) on debates about mental deficiency. The aim of this chapter is to redress this imbalance by unravelling the complex interplay of class and gender in framing Edwardian understandings of feeble-mindedness. Focusing on a particular set of exchanges that took place in Manchester in 1911, this chapter highlights and analyses crucial incongruities in the logic of Edwardian reformers and exposes the conflict between the rhetoric and practice of pioneers of segregation.

Introduction

During parliamentary debates on the Feeble-Minded Persons (Control) Bill introduced by Gershom Stewart in 1912, Josiah Wedgwood, Liberal M.P for Newcastle-under-Lyme and a staunch supporter of individual liberty, voiced a number of concerns about proposed measures to compulsorily detain the feeble-minded. First, although he recognised the value of homes for the feeble-minded, he insisted that such institutions should be voluntary, and dismissed compulsory detention as the product of expediency rather than justice. Secondly, he exposed the Bill’s failure to define feeble-
mindedness sufficiently precisely, and warned against the dangers of bestowing increased powers of certification on medical specialists. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, he challenged what he regarded as the class and gender bias inherent in the Bill. Convinced that such legislation would be used primarily to restrict the liberty of women and the working classes, Wedgwood claimed that the ‘spirit at the back of the Bill is not the spirit of charity, not the spirit of love of mankind. It is the spirit of the horrible Eugenic Society which is setting out to breed up the working classes as though they were cattle’. Although Wedgwood’s objections to compulsory detention were supported by Frederick Banbury and others, a government Bill was successfully passed in 1913. The Mental Deficiency Act invested local authorities with the powers to confine mental defectives if they were found without visible means of support, had been convicted of a criminal offence, were detained in an asylum, prison, industrial school or inebriate reformatory, or if, in the case of women, they were in receipt of poor relief when pregnant with, or while giving birth to, an illegitimate child.

In spite of Wedgwood’s exuberant efforts to expose the covert class assumptions inherent in Edwardian policies for controlling mental defectives, and in spite of a growing body of historical literature addressing the relationship between class and insanity (largely in the context of the Poor Law), until recently historians have paid relatively scant attention to the impact of class concerns on debates about mental deficiency. The works of Donald Mackenzie, Geoffrey Searle, David Barker, Gillian Sutherland, Greta Jones, and Gareth Stedman Jones have certainly provided extensive insights into the class composition of eugenists, Fabian socialists, and other political and professional groups involved in establishing segregatory policies for the feeble-minded. However, these studies have generally failed to unravel the classist assumptions inherent in contemporary rhetoric or to link that rhetoric clearly to institutional practices adopted in the early-twentieth century. More recently, Mathew Thomson and, to a lesser extent, Tim Stainton have explored the manner in which the elaboration of novel segregatory policies for the feeble-minded interacted not only with ‘anxieties about regulating the boundaries of responsible citizenship’, but also more broadly with the process of ‘adjusting to democracy’. In this context, Thomson is probably right to suggest that since the notion that mental defectives were ‘fundamentally different from normal responsible citizens’ was ‘often held most firmly by members of the “respectable” working class, the segregation of mental defectives cannot be dismissed as a