

Book Reviews

Simon Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860–1940*, Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time No. 27, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. xviii, 704, £50.00, \$74.95 (0–521–34343–7).

In 1911, the decennial British census asked married women how long they had been married, the number of children to whom they had given birth and how many of those children yet survived. Writing up the results of this survey in his official *Fertility of Marriage Report*, Dr T H C Stevenson described clear differences in fertility across five classes and explained fertility decline as a behaviour which was diffusing down from Britain's professional class to its unskilled working class. Szreter describes this as a unitary explanation because it takes one unit of analysis, the nation, and explores but one dimension, the one which arranges the chosen classes in a simple hierarchy. Szreter seeks both to evaluate and to explain this model of the British fertility decline.

By reworking the materials in the tables represented by Stevenson, Szreter shows that the variation in fertility within each "class" was every bit as striking as the differences between the classes. The book pursues dozens of occupational groups which had anomalous fertility for their ascribed class. The explanations for these disparate fertility trajectories wreak havoc with any single-factor theories such as that of Stevenson. Szreter offers a framework for explaining these pertinent differences. In the first place, Szreter stresses, couples perceived the costs and benefits of childbearing in terms of its consequences for the mother's ability to earn wages. Thus in textile districts, women's wages were important to the family economy and childbearing was a somewhat unwelcome interruption to that. In mining districts, women by and large were not in formal employment and fertility was high. In the Potteries, women worked but labour recruitment was organized

through kin and outwork allowed even quite young children to earn their keep. Thus, in the Potteries, the family was a work unit and fertility was consequently high.

The second dimension of differentiation related to what is here termed communication communities. In other words, couples identified with certain socially or regionally circumscribed fertility norms. Where a group, such as coal miners, dominated a district their fertility could take on the character of such a norm for other occupational groups living there. Where a group, such as those in some service occupations, lived almost entirely within the social world of another group, in this case their aristocratic clients, here again they might well take on the fertility norms of this broader reference group. This interdigitation of economic and social considerations produced a complex array of fertility behaviours which Stevenson's model could not comprehend. This complex interaction was also subject to the differentiating effects of secular changes in such matters as: the cost and availability of contraceptives, the consequences of compulsory education for the household economy, and the feminist debates over the role and status of women.

So much for the evaluation of Stevenson's model, but Szreter is perhaps even more interested in its explanation which is here related in particular to the politics of the General Register Office, which prepared the 1911 Census and from which Stevenson wrote his Report. At the risk of caricaturing the exhaustive genealogy given in the book, we might note the special stress laid upon the way the environmentalist sanitary model of the nineteenth century met the challenge of eugenics in the first part of the twentieth. Szreter reminds us of the ecological focus of the General Register Office under Farr. The obsession with urban-rural differences in mortality was tied to a political project which aimed at shaming city and town authorities into

cleaning up the houses and streets under their charge. This emphasis upon the amelioration of mortality extended to the occupational categorization adopted in the published reports on the successive decennial census of the second half of the nineteenth century. Classes were defined in terms of the materials with which and the manner in which people worked. There was no attempt at an economic analysis based on a hierarchy of incomes or on control over the workplace. Indeed, the distinctions between masters and men, and between workers and dealers were but poorly treated by the Census classification.

Eugenicists, such as Galton, wanted class analysis to demonstrate that the unfit were reproducing too quickly and swamping the contracepting elite. The General Register Office consistently sought to thwart the use of official statistics in support of such a hereditarian model. Stevenson, instead, reconceptualized the social hierarchy as based on rationality not inheritance. Placing professionals, rather than the aristocracy, at the top, and then dividing the working class by levels of skill, an altogether more optimistic picture was presented of a lag between top and bottom rather than of an accumulation of degeneration at the base, and of a progressive future in which the whole working class could invest in its children to raise the overall level of skill.

This is an audacious work and requires such detailed review that this short note can do little more than commend it to demographic, medical and intellectual historians.

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Irving Loudon (ed.), *Childbed fever: a documentary history*, Diseases, Epidemics, and Medicine series, New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1995, pp. xvii, 224, \$43.00 (0-8153-1079-X).

The modern emphasis on the contextualization of knowledge and the importance of practice has meant that collections of primary texts have rather gone

out of fashion in recent years. Against this trend, Charles Rosenberg has initiated a series of "documentary histories" of diseases; Barbara Rosenkrantz edited the first collection on tuberculosis and Irvine Loudon now follows with a volume on childbed fever. The series aims to develop further the approaches used in the influential *Framing disease* collection, especially taking disease entities as a focus to bring together "intellectual and social history" with studies of the "changing configuration of problems of management, potential stigmatisation or sympathy for sufferers, and clinical understanding" (p. xi). Childbed or puerperal fever is a subject that is long overdue for sensitive discussion, as its history has been dominated by hagiography, especially of the lives and work of Alexander Gordon, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ignaz Semmelweis.

Loudon's introductory essay provides an excellent account of changing views on the nature, sources and management of the disease, as well as a critical commentary on its historiography, especially the curious status of Semmelweis. However, the great value of the introduction is the way in which, using Rosenberg's schema of "configuration", "contamination" and "predisposition" developed for the explanation of epidemics, Loudon links childbed fever to the wider history of fevers and contagion. The selected texts include publications by Gordon, Holmes and Semmelweis, but the bulk of the documents are rightly by practitioners who are not, and were not, seen as innovative or prescient. These sources reveal the thinking of ordinary practitioners, and show how professional, social and personal concerns ran together in their attempts to understand and control one of the most emotive of diseases. Loudon's introductory comments to each document, which are models of compression, explain the choice of source, place the author and document in context, and offer guidance on "reading". The overriding impression from the collection is of continuities and the unevenness of change. For example, antisepsis and sulphonamides, that Loudon has shown elsewhere to have had a marked impact on