

Book Reviews

Such topics readily lend themselves to sterile presentist polemics (witness the controversy stirred up recently by Edward Shorter's *A history of women's bodies*). Hence it is specially pleasing that Mireille Laget, in her survey of birthing practices in Enlightenment France, eschews indignation and poses a key historical question. Noting the degree of pluralism then prevailing in approaches to childbirth, she begins to examine how women themselves made choices as to method and type of practitioner when coming to plan their lyings-in. The rise of the man-midwife, she suggests, may not have been the death-blow to client choice, but may instead have extended the range of options. It may be worth noting here that several of the Oriental scholars confirm the suggestion recently made by Shorter and Adrian Wilson, that traditional all-women birthing practices, centring on the midwife, were commonly experienced by the mother as more interventionist and brutal than the practices of the newer male obstetricians.

Ann Oakley's book encounters a similar paradox. Through an admirably researched empirical study of the rise of antenatal care in Britain from the late nineteenth century (her subtitle is grossly over-inflated), she shows how traditional, community-centred, women-oriented pregnancy care steadily gave way to a more medicalized, more bureaucratic approach—sometimes degenerating into the “assembly-line”—dominated by male obstetricians, and focused upon the hospital and the clinic. Oakley notes that this shift did indeed produce improvements in health (though she queries exactly how far medical science has been responsible for the more general improvement of the health of pregnant women this century). But her case is that the motor for changing practices came less from a concern with women's health than from a desire to control their bodies and life-styles (hence the provocative title, with its “captured womb”). But this interpretation of the rise of antenatal services as a tactic in the social control of women is fraught with difficulty. This is in part because the impetus for the movement came more from articulate women's pressure groups than from the medical profession (largely sluggish and indifferent)—it was women themselves who wanted the medicalization of pregnancy; and in part because the kind of women (i.e., “feckless” working-class women) whom patriarchy, one supposes, would most seek to control, are precisely those who, by choice, have always remained least affected by antenatal services.

Two important conclusions are suggested by these stimulating and original books. First, it is clear that medicine is never just about medicine. Questions of health and morbidity are impossible to separate from their cultural, social, sex-specific, and political matrices. These dimensions are greatly illuminated in all these studies. Second, it is crude to view “medicine” as an alien force intruding on to people from outside or from above. There have been popular medical cultures as well as professional medicine, and the relations between them are rarely those of warfare, conquest, and appropriation, but more often ones of integration, choice, or hegemony. The cases of fertility control, childbirth, and antenatal care all show the great and continuing role of the client, the patient, in shaping the emergent pattern of medical action.

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IAN INKSTER and JACK MORRELL (editors), *Metropolis and province. Science in British culture 1780–1850*, London, Hutchinson, 1983, 8vo, pp. 288, £17.50.

This is an excellent collection of essays showing us the direction in which the social history of science is moving. It is introduced by Ian Inkster with a thoughtful disussion of the issues raised by the various contributors.

The heyday of the grand explanatory schemes of the development of science has long gone, and the single-factor explanations of a Marxist economic kind are now unfashionable. The study of past science has become fine-grained and differentiated, distinguishing between individual branches of science (not always sufficiently yet), between different countries, regions, centuries, even decades, and, as in this volume, between metropolis and province. The “lumpers” of the past have been thoroughly routed by the “splitters” of today. Not

Book Reviews

surprisingly, this high-resolution history, which focuses more often than not on the practice of science rather than on science as a system of thought, has produced several new explanatory models: science was practised to legitimate a rising social class of marginal men; it functioned as a shibboleth of radical politics; it was used by the ruling élite to preserve its hegemony; it provided a channel for upward social mobility; etc.

To be sure, economic utility had a formative influence on scientific activity too, as Paul Weindling argues in his study of the short-lived British Mineralogical Society. But Jack Morell shows how even in such an avowedly utilitarian set-up as that of the Geological and Polytechnic Society of the West Riding of Yorkshire the ornamental function of geological knowledge came to dominate its economic interest. Local conflicts, as distinct from national divides, were also a moulding condition. Steven Shapin stresses the peculiar position of Edinburgh as a “provincial metropolis” where the Combeites formed an alliance with the lesser bourgeoisie which nurtured local cultural ambitions. And Derek Orange examines the significance of the personality of William Turner and his Calvinist dissenting convictions for the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society.

In their emphasis on science as a cultural activity, many historians tend to ignore “great scientists” and “great universities” in favour of marginal men, dissenters, radicals, phrenologists, minor naturalists, the lesser institutions and societies, and the outright “failures”. The further a case study can be found away from any establishmentarian apex, the more earnestly its explanatory value for the development of science will be argued. As an antidote to the earlier “great men” tradition, this is wholly good, but the new orthodoxy should not become an equal extreme of the opposite.

Fortunately, there is balance in this volume. Michael Neve’s essay on scientific Bristol (1820–60) makes it clear that in the West Country science was not the property of marginal men, but the achievement of the well-established, predominantly Anglican bourgeoisie acting in alliance with the Oxbridge élite and with a metropolitan conservative culture à la Peel.

Two contributions in this collection are of particular interest to the historian of medicine. Both use the notion that scientific expertise functioned to consolidate or increase the social prestige of the medical profession. Roy MacLeod concludes from a study of the reform movement in the Royal Society (1830–48) that the scientific and medical establishments recognized the importance of “philosophical” excellence as a means to justify their social status. And M. Durey shows that during the cholera epidemic of 1831–32, individual practitioners came through the crisis with enhanced prestige, but that the profession as a whole failed to do so. Also of medical interest is J. N. Hays’s valuable account of the London “lecturing empire” (1800–50); London scientific life was dominated by the lecture, and much of the freelance lecturing was aimed at the medical students; as medical education became more formalized, so the scientific lecturing became more institutionalized.

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TREVOR I. WILLIAMS, *Howard Florey. Penicillin and after*, Oxford University Press, 1984, 8vo, pp. xvi, 404, illus., £17.50.

It was difficult to imagine that anybody could write a comparable sequel to Gwyn Macfarlane’s enthralling *Howard Florey: the making of a great scientist*, but Dr Trevor Williams has done so. Macfarlane left us at 1942, the year when penicillin became a public success, covering Florey’s remaining twenty-six years in a short epilogue. Williams’s *Howard Florey: penicillin and after* is its mirror image, brief on the earlier part of the career, full on the latter—when the complex mixture of the brash and the sensitive, restless and naïve, impetuous and unsure became ultimately the public smiling man, a Nobel prizewinner much sought after as a committee figure, a respected head of an Oxford college, an innovative President of the Royal Society, and a powerful formative influence on the Australian National University.

Nevertheless, Williams is right to remind us first of the transformation that Florey brought