

Nursing and Midwifery in Britain since 1700 edited by Anne Borsay and Billie Hunter 2012, Palgrave Macmillan 244 pages, pbk, 978-0-230-24703-1 £21.99

This useful and readable edited volume opens with an introduction on historical approaches to nursing and midwifery. This introduction looks at ways of 'doing history' (p9-13), sources and methods and concludes that 'the assumption of progress – however deep-seated – is untenable' (p13-14).

The book is in three parts: nursing 1700-2000, midwifery 1700-2000 and comparing nursing and midwifery. The major, recurring themes concern professionalisation, where care takes place and the process of institutionalisation, gender, class and ethnicity, the emergence of specialisms in nursing and inter-professional relations between nursing, midwifery and medicine. Nursing and midwifery are examined at equal length and the parallel themes explored so that they can be compared, a format which seems helpful rather than constricting to the reader. Looking beyond the recent past is useful in showing the complexity of our past and preventing the common assumption that midwifery history effectively started in 1902.

The eminent contributors on midwifery history include Helen King on eighteenth century midwifery, Alison Nuttall on 1800-1920 and Billie Hunter on 1920-2000. The chapters are well referenced, using a wide range of sources which gave me lots of ideas for further reading.

The last section comparing nursing and midwifery is the unique contribution of the book. Winifred Connerton and Patricia D'Antonio explore the nursing-midwifery interface in Australia, the United States and Canada. They examine the UK and US models of maternity care and how they came about and how often the professionalisation of nursing led to nursing support for medically attended hospital births which was directly and actively linked to the fall in the status of midwifery. Billie Hunter and Anne Borsay examine the relationship between nursing and midwifery in the UK, noting that it was only from the end of the nineteenth century, with campaigns for registration and as care became medicalised and institutionalised, that they converged. By the 1960s 'it became increasingly difficult to differentiate between the two professions'. The complex web of allegiances and feuds is succinctly stated.

In a short epilogue Jane Sandall and Anne Marie Rafferty take a sociological approach to explore the implications of the historical analysis for contemporary policy and practice. Starting from the Prime Minister's Commission on Nursing and Midwifery (2010) they highlight the continuity with the 'grand challenges' (p226) faced by both traditions in the past and the need to 'put our house in order' (p228). There is a call to 'understand the dynamics that lead to poor care' (p228) but, frustratingly for the reader there is no examination of the context which creates those dynamics, just a clarion call to move on.

This is an excellent collection of historical contributions which fit together well. The element of comparison increases our understanding of the history of both professions. The epilogue's attempt to bring it completely up to date is so brief that it is inevitably a disappointment.

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