

Thompson, Elizabeth (2001)
The diary of a Kendal midwife 1669-1675
Reviewed by Dr Lindsay Reid

This intriguing diary is an important social record. In addition it is of value to family historians, as it covers a period when the parish records are missing. It is given a comprehensive and helpful introduction by its series editor Loraine Ashcroft.

This publication of the diary gives a carefully edited version of the original, a photograph and details of which appear on page xv. The editorial method is also described and explained; it has been used to clarify any idiosyncrasies of the time.

The diary begins on 'March the 25 1669'. Each entry is numbered 1, 2, 3, and most entries give name of the child and whether son or daughter, name of the father, sometimes the time, date, day of the week, area/house of the family where a birth took place, and, father's occupation. The entries are not all written in the same style or order of information. Nevertheless, the information given for each entry is meticulous in its own way: for example:

1 Robart the sone of Michall Studham born betwixt 1 & 2 of clocke after noone March the 25 being Thursday kerkand weaver.

2 Isabell the Daughter of Will Wilson borne about seaven a clocke in the evening aprill th 7 being Wednesday High gatt Tanar

50 Mary the Daughter of Thomas Walles of Finkell street Glovar or Tobaccoe cutter borne the 16 of march about 5a clock in the evening being Wednesday

The immediate point that jumps out to the 21st century eye is that the mothers are not mentioned in the entries. Male standing of the day supervened over female. However, a higher standing requires acceptance of responsibilities, and Loraine Ashcroft reminds us in the introduction of the licensed midwife's role in cases of disputed paternity: to elicit the name of the father from the labouring mother and report the information to an ecclesiastical body.

Yet, women were in control in the birthing room. The introduction points out how the occasion of birth in Elizabeth Thompson's (the likely identity of this midwife) day was woman-centred in its own way. It was social, women came together for the birth, and during the lying-in period husbands were usually excluded. In addition the midwife frequently received work on the recommendation of women, not their husbands.

Elizabeth Thompson probably had no formal midwifery training. It is very possible that she was licensed through an ecclesiastical authority and would have had to adhere to the oaths that she would have taken. The introduction suggests that it was probably Elizabeth Thompson's public accountability which led her to keep a diary. It is, however, kept to an 'economic formulaic style'. Given that Elizabeth Thompson seems to have been in attendance at many births, it is a privilege to have sight of such a precise record.

As well as the diary, the book contains wills, and an inventory for her Will of Elizabeth Thompson's 'Goods and Chattells'. There are also indices: of names, which gives a good idea of the numbers and frequency of names of people in the area at that time; of places, indicating therefore which streets had the highest birth rates; and of occupations, showing for example that there were ten hatters in the area at the time.

This is a fascinating book full of social information as well as being the diary of a busy midwife. Of course, it also opens up more questions. I recommend it.

Lindsay Reid