

Title: *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England*

Author: Audrey Eccles

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Audrey Eccles book considers the advance of obstetrics and gynaecology from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, specifically, the period from 1540, which marks the initial publication of *The birth of mankind*, to 1740. Between these years much had changed in the professions surrounding childbirth from both scientific and social aspects. However, the knowledge and practices described in this book predate, and probably have a part to play, in energising the sharp rise in the popularity of the man-midwife in the mid-eighteenth century. Adrian Wilson contends that a new class of literate women evolving from this time possibly broke up the collectivity of women and played a part in the trend away from their use of midwives.¹

Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England is divided into thirteen chapters. The first presents a review of obstetrical textbooks published, with a few earlier exceptions, within the period of the book. This sets the book in context and presents suggestions for deeper reading around the subject.

Chapters two and three tell us briefly of the ‘legacy of the ancients’ and the reverence with in which these facts were held. And yet how slowly some were put to use: William Harvey’s discovery of blood circulation in 1628 was fifty years old before midwifery use was made of it (p. 21).

Discussion on the female reproductive system follows with its theories and beliefs, through a logical procession of chapters. These covered sexuality and conception, development and birth of the foetus, the many ideas and signs leading to diagnosis of pregnancy, how women were cared for antenatally. For example, they were given advice that ‘sleeping after dinner was bad for pregnant women’ (p. 42).

Eccles makes the point that contraception was not officially available during this time. Nevertheless, contraception and abortion were practised in some circles and some authors of the day conceded that this happened. The promotion of conception was followed with vigour with ideas of what to eat or drink or what charms to wear to promote the desired pregnancy.

Chapter nine takes us to gynaecology and its diseases. Eccles highlights the importance of pain control in cancer and illustrates the point with a quote regarding a woman who ‘took every night for four months together, two or three grains of laudanum, and had no hurt, but very great comfort thereby’ (p. 85).

¹ Wilson A, (1995) *The making of man-midwifery* London University College, London Press 1995.

No book on obstetrics and gynaecology would be complete without chapters on normal birth, management of relevant complications and operative delivery. This book contains all of these. We read of midwifery practice and its pitfalls, Willughby's comments on midwives who ran into trouble following the instructions laid down in *The birth of mankind* and note good advice from the same book on psychological management of labour: 'The midwife was to support the patient ... "with swete wordes, geuyngy her good hope of a spedefull delyueraunce...' (p. 89). Also discussed are vaginal examination, traction at birth, manual extraction of the placenta, what was done with the 'navel-string' and what the Gossips said, what could be done with the placenta, postnatal care, diet, breastfeeding and its refusal by some women leading to wet-nursing. There follows a short chapter on operative deliveries, practice and instruments. A short appendix gives notes on the 'Willughby cases' on maternal mortality.

This book carries much information in a relatively small volume. Eccles does not waste a word in her zeal to give the facts, the background, and relevant references. There are also some interesting photographic plates of anatomical drawings and instruments. Notes are situated at the end of the text – not my favourite place but in a small volume they are not difficult to locate. I would also have liked a bibliography as well as the Notes section for ease of use.

I recommend this book.

Lindsay Reid

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