

# De Partu

History of Midwifery and Childbirth Research Group



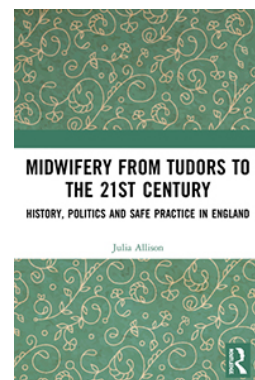
## **Midwifery from Tudors to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: History, Politics, and Safe Practice in England**

Julia Allison

Routledge, 2020

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£34.99 (paperback)



Julia Allison's latest book joins a growing body of scholarship dispelling the nineteenth-century myth that midwives were dirty, drunken, and ill-educated. *Midwifery from Tudors to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: History, Politics, and Safe Practice in England* uses a combination of careful archival research and personal experience to form a manifesto for the safety and practicality of home birth across the centuries.

The distribution of chapters makes Allison's passions clear, with much of the book focussing on the period before the seventeenth century and the aftermath of the Second World War. Chapters one to five make use of an impressive survey of archives, mostly in Essex, to discuss the roles and responsibilities, lives and practice of midwives from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Using the fruits of her labours in the archive, Allison undertakes the difficult task of assessing maternal and infant death in this period before the existence of standardised record-keeping. Her own extensive experience in midwifery allows her to contextualise these statistics, concluding that 'in terms of maternal mortality, Tudor midwives were achieving results that would not be bettered until the 20<sup>th</sup> century' [p.46]. Chapters five, six, and seven provide readers with an overview of developments in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, including the rise of the man-midwife and the emergence of the 'modern' medical profession, to bring us to the first legislation to regulate the practice of midwives, the Midwives Act 1902. The impact of war on the public health of mothers, and upon the development of midwifery services, is covered in chapters nine and ten. The remainder of the book reads as part memoir, part call-to-arms, as Allison charts the decline of home birth as a result of a concerted effort by hospitals and medical men with little or no experience of domiciliary midwifery. Her fierce advocacy for women to have the choice to give birth in their own homes, with the support of their families and friends, is supported by her command of mortality statistics, and her own extensive experience. 'For long enough' she concludes 'medical men have dictated how and where childbirth should be conducted. A pregnancy belongs to the woman and her partner, not to an obstetrician.' [p.186].

As an historian, I would have enjoyed a greater depth of engagement with the exciting and vibrant historiography that has emerged around the topic of midwifery and birth in the last decade. As a reader with an interest in midwifery, however, this will not matter to you. You



will be subsumed into the stories of Mother Lamberd and Elenor Brown in sixteenth-century Essex, and their counterparts in the twentieth century domiciliary midwifery service, Mary Carrucane, Joyce Tarlton and Audrey Knight. Julia Allison brings their stories out of the archives, encouraging women to have confidence in midwifery-led care and its long lineage of expertise and excellent outcomes.

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