

Pregnancy, Delivery, Childbirth: A Gender and Cultural History from Antiquity to the Test Tube in Europe

Nadia Maria Filippini

2021

Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group

£34.99

ISBN 9780367211080

At first glance, this book, a distillation of 30 years of study, fulfils an embarrassing need in the largely monoglot Anglophone midwifery history world. Drawing on much Italian, French, Spanish and German research, it examines the changing cultural place of pregnancy and childbirth from prehistory to the present. Initially focused on ‘Cultural Representations’, it argues that, despite the fact that we are all born from a woman’s body, the mother-goddess of the very distant past was long ago demoted in favour of the more masculine idea of generation, that the sower of the seed became as important as the ground onto which it fell. This has given rise to a series of long-lasting dichotomies: not only generation and birth, but also motherhood and war, body and mind, within which, it is argued, the male (that is, the cerebral), predominates.

The cultural emphasis is maintained in Part 2, ‘Giving birth and being born from antiquity to the 18th century’. For example, the long-lived folk tradition of undoing all belts and knots when in labour is analysed in great detail, while the concept of natural and un-natural birth (interpreted here as cephalic versus breech) is similarly explored, with breech presentation being seen, not as more dangerous in obstetric terms, but as unlucky and a warning of danger because the position mirrored burial ritual. A wide range of other themes are similarly explored, including antenatal influences, and the childbirth and postpartum scene. However, the necessary focus on topics can lead to some striking and possibly confusing leaps around the millennia, perhaps best illustrated by different attitudes to placental disposal.

The third part, called ‘the 18th-century juncture’ (although it is recognised that change occurred at different times in different states, and some of the themes discussed have their origins in the nineteenth century) moves the story onto more familiar ground, although British readers may be surprised by the number of minor mainland European states setting up maternity hospitals and providing midwifery training. Unusually, the benefits of such training are questioned, and it is suggested that the trainee midwives were essentially different to their more traditional predecessors, being not only literate, but also younger and with less personal experience of childbirth, and thus more amenable to control by doctors, church, and state. At much the same time, it is argued, doctors took over the manual manipulative skills of midwives and reworked them into their use of forceps, eventually excluding midwives from using any manipulation. It is claimed that in Protestant states they also took over midwives’ practices, and here the limitations of the use of selected secondary sources, necessary in such a wide-ranging work, can be seen. Drawing on Shorter’s work alone, it is claimed three-quarters of British births were attended by a doctor in 1895, yet only 14 years before the prospectus of the Matrons’ Aid or Trained Midwives’ Registration Society had declared that

at most three in ten were. Although the bibliography is extensive, stretching to nearly 30 pages, it is surprisingly limited as regards recent work on midwifery in Britain.

The long eighteenth century saw the development of the 'foetus as citizen'. New scientific understanding of conception sparked concern for the fetal soul, leading to a greater emphasis on the preservation of infant life. States became similarly interested in infant survival, but more for reasons of population growth, a theme further explored in the final part, 'the contemporary age'. Ultimately the new independence of the fetus is demonstrated by the development of the ultrasound scan, revealing life *in utero* through medical expertise, while excluding the mother's experience of her own body. Other contemporary themes examined include not only the increasing involvement of the state in maternal and infant health, but also pain relief, hospitalisation, eugenics, motherhood as a consumer choice, and abortion. Finally artificial insemination is explored, and it is argued that the ready acceptance of this scientific development has created the ultimate dichotomy, between biological and social parents, and has confirmed the independence of the fetus from the moment of conception. Nonetheless, this apparent positivity is not sustained in the final conclusions. While the end of ideas of maternal impurity, and a new pride in the pregnant body are welcomed, the author warns that women's reproductive health remains vulnerable to political and social extremism.

This is a work of considerable scholarship. Its compressed nature means it is not an easy read (and it is not always well-served by its translator) but it is stimulating and thought-provoking throughout. Although I can hear the loud denials from here, I believe that in Britain we focus almost entirely on the practicalities of childbirth in the past, with limited interest in the contemporary thought and culture contributing to that care: this book takes a very different approach, and I thoroughly recommend it.

Alison Nuttall RGN, SCM, BA (Hons), MSc (by research), PhD