The Domain of Childbirth

Brought to Bed. Childbearing in America, 1750 to 1950. JUDITH WALZER LEAVITT. Oxford University Press, New York, 1986. xii, 284 pp. illus. $21.95.

In the historical literature, the birthing experience emerges as either a morality tale of the great march of medical enlightenment or a horror story of iatrogenic perfidiousness. Historian Judith Walzer Leavitt has provided a more complex understanding of this most enduring biological, yet culturally shaped, event. In this finely crafted and elegantly argued study, Leavitt has restored historical agency to women and provided a sympathetic accounting of the physician's difficulties.

The approach is both narrative and analytic. The chronology is familiar: the Colonial era of women-controlled home births is slowly changed by the introduction of physicians into the birthing chamber until, in the 1920s and 1930s, physician-controlled hospital births come to predominate. But Leavitt adds a sophisticated analysis that reveals the dilemmas faced by both the parturient and her birth attendants that made changing birthing customs possible.

The author argues that safety and control over birthing were crucial concerns to physicians and women alike. In her analysis, women's gratefulness to their physicians is balanced against their anger at loss of control over certain aspects of birth. In turn, the doctors' desire to "do something" is examined in relationship to the state of medical knowledge, the political and economic position of obstetrics as a specialty, and women's demands. Leavitt is sensitive to the pressures women put on physicians and to the medical "panic" that often occurred in difficult birthing situations. Never assuming there was only one kind of physician or group of women, she is also careful to note regional and educational differences among doctors and race and class differences among women.

Leavitt begins by suggesting that the realistic fear of death or serious injury overshadowing the birthing bed made it possible for some upper-class women, in the late 18th century, to begin to look for the safety that physician-attended births seemed to offer. Various chapters on forceps, asepsis, and pain relief examine these women's hopes and assay the effectiveness and promise of medical care. Because Leavitt sees birthing as a continually negotiated event, she is arguing that the physician's entree into the birthing chamber did not mean automatic loss of control by the parturient woman or her other attendants. Unlike some feminist historians, Leavitt is thus suggesting that it was the context (home versus hospital), not the mere presence of physicians, that affected the control women had over the birth process. And unlike some medical historians, she is concerned with both the patient's role in shaping medical decisions and the difference between the promise of medicine and its realities.

With safety and control as her underlying themes, Leavitt is alert to the seeming ironies in the history: for example, it was women, not physicians, who argued for control over birth by wanting the use of scopolamine and morphine, or "twilight sleep." She sees in the 1910s debate over twilight sleep the beginning of the redefinition of birthing as an "illness" requiring hospitalization and the basis for physicians' growing sense of power. It was the increasing abstruseness of medical science, the desire of women for "modern" and safe births, and doctors' quest for the removal of "lay" interference from the birthing process, she argues, that finally made the transition to hospital births possible. Using medical debates, biographies, popular literature, diaries, and the letters of women who answered her author's inquiry in the *New York Times*, Leavitt paints a balanced portrait of the problems with hospital births.

Leavitt ends her book in 1950 at the beginning of yet another change in birthing history: the rise of the natural childbirth movement. Her keen insights into this important era are needed, and the book should have had another chapter. In a note, Leavitt calls for an analysis of role of nursing in transition from home-based to hospital-based births. But such an examination should not have been left out of a medical history and would have helped to explain women's hopes from and disappointments with hospital births.

Leavitt has provided us with an excellent history of childbearing. But even more, the book serves as a model of scholarship on change in medical practice, the ideological function of science, and the place of childbearing in women's lives and culture. No other book to date has so successfully negotiated these politically mined historical waters with such sophistication and skill.

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The Biology of Plants

Plant Ecology. MICHAEL J. CRAWLEY, Ed. Blackwell Scientific, Palo Alto, CA, 1986. xiv, 496 pp., illus. $55; paper, $29.95.

Plant ecology and the related disciplines of plant biology have undergone rapid development during the last 15 years. As plant population biology has expanded, the boundaries between the traditional botanical disciplines have become blurred. For example, anatomical and morphological models are now used to predict the dynamics of clonal plant populations. Similarly, physiological ecologists determine how variation in environmental factors such as water, temperature, and light control the growth, survival, and reproduction of individuals making up populations. In this new book 7 of the 12 chapters are specifically devoted to population ecology or population genetics. Of the remaining five, three focus on community ecology and two on physiological ecology, but all are strongly oriented toward population ecology.

The book should be viewed as a state-of-the-art treatise for scientists and advanced graduate students, summarizing critical ideas and research on plant population biology and citing over 1200 references in the process. Most of the chapters give a balanced overview of a major topic in plant ecology, such as Watkinson's on population dynamics and Crawley's on life history and environment. (In this the book may be contrasted with *Perspectives on Plant Population Ecology* [1984], edited by Dirzo and Sarukhán, which emphasized research results.) The chapters are written by acknowledged experts at an advanced level. Considerable background material is summarized quite briefly. The book does not cover basic aspects of plant ecology that are covered in textbooks, such as vegetation sampling, the major vegetation types of the world, how transpiration and photosynthetic rates are measured, and how to conduct transplant experiments. More illustrative material would have helped create excitement about the natural history aspects of the subject for the beginning researcher. Illustrations would have been particularly useful in