

## Book Reviews

delivery. In such circumstances, he argued, childbirth occurred quickly, with few complications, limited discomfort, and little need for the medical intervention that had become a regular part of modern obstetrical practice. For Dick-Read a “natural birth” transcended medicine, having important social, if not religious, connotations. A pleasant and uncomplicated delivery, he believed, best prepared a woman psychologically for the responsibilities of motherhood.

Physicians criticized Dick-Read’s theories for undermining established medical practice and for their lack of scientific content. Regardless, “natural childbirth” found favour among many women, who, in the aftermath of the Second World War had become distrustful of science and sought return to a simpler style of life. It is noteworthy that Benjamin Spock’s *The common sense book of baby and child care*, published almost contemporaneously with Dick-Read’s first book, had a similar message and reaped similar public acclaim.

No less important for Dick-Read’s success, he understood patients. This point becomes clear in this collection of letters edited by Mary Thomas. Encouraged by his books, women from all parts of the world wrote to Dick-Read to describe their experience with pregnancy, childbirth, hospitals, and physicians, and to praise or criticize his theories of “natural birth”. Dick-Read answered most of them. From this voluminous correspondence Thomas has selected representative letters to illustrate the hopes, fears, triumphs and tragedies of these women. Many are astonishingly candid. Dick-Read’s replies, equally forthright and personal, suggest a physician of great warmth, understanding, and patience—characteristics that probably contributed greatly to the success of his methods in his own practice. They also reveal Dick-Read’s messianic faith in his method, and his belief that a “natural” birth could transform society. His comments about other physicians, often critical if not

scathing, help explain his unpopularity among colleagues.

Professor Thomas has chosen and organized her material well. She begins with an essay that includes pertinent biographical material about Dick-Read, and a historical review of modern obstetrical practice. Each of the remaining sections deals with a different issue: scientific childbirth, feelings of failure, success in natural childbirth, and disagreeing with the method, for example. Thomas introduces each group of letters with a short essay that puts the material into its social and medical context. The book is informative and interesting to read. Most importantly, it provides a wealth of insight and resource material for anyone interested in the evolution of childbirth practices in the twentieth century.

**Donald Caton,**

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**Georg Berger, *Die Beratenden Psychiater des deutschen Heeres 1939 bis 1945*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 328, £33.00 (3-631-33296-3).**

In the early 1970s Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, one of France’s leading historians, famously prophesied that the computer would one day replace the historian. Perhaps he came to this conclusion after reading a German medical dissertation. At their best, German medical dissertations supply researchers with a wealth of information, rigorously tabulated, classified, footnoted and summarized, thus providing useful starting points for broader and more ambitious investigations. At their worst, however, they can be narrowly internalist studies that plug up minor cracks in the edifice of medical–historical scholarship. Both descriptions apply to Georg Berger’s study of German military psychiatry in the Second World War.

Berger’s work, a Freiburg medical

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dissertation, undertakes an analysis of the sixty or so consulting psychiatrists (*beratende Psychiater*) who advised military–medical authorities about a range of psychiatric and neurological illnesses during the Second World War. These doctors were, for the most part, university psychiatry professors whom the Wehrmacht enlisted at the beginning of the war, most were born in the decades surrounding the turn of the century, had served in the First World War and had been propelled into political conservatism by the Revolution of 1918/19. Based on a meticulous survey of their official reports and correspondence—though neglecting the voluminous published medical literature—the study covers the consulting psychiatrists’ ongoing discussions of the etiological, diagnostic and therapeutic dimensions of the conditions they most frequently observed. Berger combines this with a biographical and institutional analysis of this medical cohort, which he locates politically and generationally in Germany’s medical and military landscape.

Berger concludes that, with few exceptions, these psychiatrists showed less concern for the welfare of individual patients than with Germany’s military needs. Roughly one-third of the sixty were Nazi Party members, several had joined the SS and five were directly involved in the Nazis’ murder of the mentally ill. Thus, Berger argues that genuine medical care was sacrificed for ideological concerns and political expediency. Particularly in the case of “hysterical reactions” or war neuroses, psychiatric judgements were suffused with moral and political values, and treatments were often harsh, painful and dangerous.

This book unearths a great deal of useful information, presenting a quantitative breakdown of the most common psychiatric and neurological illnesses seen both at the front and in reserve hospitals in home territory (nerve damage being the most common), biographical sketches of the consulting psychiatrists and insight into the

structure and function of the Wehrmacht’s military–medical hierarchy. Several chapters helpfully contextualize their subjects with brief overviews of psychiatric practice from the First World War and the Weimar period. And interesting and little-known areas, such as psychiatric discussion of bed-wetting and impotence are brought to light. However, readers hoping for broader conclusions about psychiatry, the war and National Socialism will come away disappointed. Hitler receives no mention in this book; nor do Jews, anti-Semitism or concentration camps. The Nazi Physicians League is likewise absent, as are references to other national contexts. The war itself is presented without mention of its unprecedented brutality or its ideological underpinnings, which is particularly unforgivable in light of recent revelations about the complicity of the Wehrmacht in carrying out the “Final Solution”. These omissions limit the relevance of this useful, but frustratingly narrow treatment of a dark episode in the history of psychiatry.

**Paul Lerner,**

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**Robert Barer**, *One young man and total war (from Normandy to concentration camp, a doctor’s letters home)*, Edinburgh and Durham, Pentland Press, 1998, pp. xviii, 298, illus., £18.00 (1-85821-569-2).

Robert Barer was my Professor of Anatomy, and as such he came across like a “Doctor in the House” character—a non-sense, gruff personality, clearly unapproachable by a lowly undergraduate. He was famous for conducting the introductory, 6-hour practical class in histology, by the end of which we students had been permitted to remove the plastic covers from our microscopes, although actually plugging them in and looking down the eyepieces was not allowed until the