

## Book Reviews

Cowen and Helfand's treatment is no exception and, indeed, they readily acknowledge their debt to Edward Kremer's and George Urdang's pioneering work and its revision by Glenn Sonnedecker. To this they have been worthy successors. They have incorporated much new material offered by recent authors (though with some obvious exceptions as the bibliography reveals) and have produced a sound and, for the most part, comprehensive summary of the areas of pharmacy history that have, so far, received the detailed attention of specialist historians, bringing up to date an overview of its scientific, professional and institutional evolution. Commendably, this includes not only published and manuscript material but also relies on the evidence of objects, illustrations and a variety of ephemeral literature. It does not, however, pretend to offer a significant revision of its sources or the historiographical approach of its forbears. One possibly regrettable consequence is that the coverage, in places, is cursory and inevitably emphasizes (or re-emphasizes) certain topics at the expense of others, leaving potential new territory largely undiscussed: for instance, for the British reader there is little detailed consideration of the origins and rise of the early chemist and druggist, an area recently re-assessed from a social and economic perspective by various British historians and an issue, no doubt, of relevance to the American experience on which the writers draw so heavily. This is, self-evidently, an American publication of American authorship and emphasis: while the earlier chapters retrace the history of pharmacy through the ancient, medieval and renaissance world of Western civilization it turns firmly to the New world and to the American model, making only brief mention of its European counterparts, to recount the "triumphant" progress of pharmacy in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, this book will go a long way to meeting a need for an updated and comprehensive historical introduction to the science and practice of pharmacy and, in addition, offers a vivid insight into the wealth of magnificent pictorial representation that is available to illuminate this still much neglected area of historical research.

Kate Arnold-Forster, Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

ANGUS McLAREN, *A history of contraception from antiquity to the present day*, Family, Sexuality, and Social Relations in Past Times series, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. viii, 275, £25.00 (0-631-16711-0).

McLaren, a professor of history at the University of Victoria in Canada, has already written several scholarly monographs on the history of birth control in England, France and elsewhere. This book, a summation of his work on the subject, is considerably more ambitious, extending across all of western society and encompassing a period of three thousand years. It is the first general history of family limitation in half a century, and supersedes Norman Himes's *Medical History of Contraception* (1936). McLaren's particular virtue is the ease with which he weaves through the enormous secondary literature on contraception and abortion from the ancient Greeks to the present, while sampling the primary literature of three millennia for arresting illustrations of his larger argument.

McLaren emerges as a debunker. He is critical of historians, including the present reviewer, who portray this long span as divided by a series of watersheds. He discounts technological innovation in birth control, believing structural determinants to be more important in influencing how intensively couples attempted to curb their fertility. Note that his emphasis is on the how rather than the whether, for McLaren, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, believes that at all times and places women have tried to control their own so-called "natural" fertility. Indeed he bristles at demographers who assume that natural fertility of any kind characterized Europe before 1800, and points out that delayed marriage and prolonged lactation also constitute forms of family limitation. The book's basic argument is that birth control has always existed, merely that women in some cultures have not always employed it fully, and that what constitutes a "large" or "small" family is really "a question of perception". At times, McLaren's views approach the kind of reductionism that virtually rules out comparison.

“Fertility control has always been a culturally dependent category. Accordingly it is impossible to write ‘the’ history of the patterning of fertility, since the experience of each society has been unique” (p. 5).

McLaren offers little on medical aspects of birth control such as the technology and pharmacology of abortion, or the medical havoc of bungled and septic abortions as a factor in its own right, which women might have taken into consideration in fertility decisions. He also pays little attention to the quantitative findings of the historical demographers, whose ignorance of the cultural matrix of childbearing McLaren deplors. Yet he might have displayed a bit more interest in such work, for in the end McLaren does not satisfactorily account for the gulf between the average family size of six in traditional society and that of one and a half in our own days. In view of such a vast gap, arguments pertaining to technological innovation or the diffusion of information might be of some relevance after all, in addition to the “societal views” with which McLaren clearly feels more comfortable. Some readers may find jarring McLaren’s obsequious attentiveness to current dogma about women’s oppression and his self-righteous flagellation of males for the beastliness of their gender.

Edward Shorter, University of Toronto

RENATE BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI, *Not of woman born: representations of Caesarean birth in medieval and Renaissance culture*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1990, 8vo, pp. x, 204, illus., \$27.95, overseas \$30.75 (0-8014-2292-2).

This book is presented as a cultural history of Caesarean section, based on a wide range of source materials encompassing not only medical, religious and historical texts but also, most importantly, the early iconography of the operation. However, in the course of this study, Caesarean birth comes to be seen as a test case for “the history of gender roles”, permitting us to detect changes in the roles of women both as patients and as healers.

Caesarean section is discussed in medical texts only after the early fourteenth century, when it was normally performed after the death of the mother in labour. By the late sixteenth century there was some debate concerning the possibility of both mother and child surviving such an operation. Children whose life came, literally, out of death were, in a sense, “unborn” and thus anomalous. By a process of “creative etymology”, largely based on Latin words for “cut” and “thick hair”, Julius Caesar came to be associated with such a birth, but so was a world leader yet to come: the Antichrist. The strongest chapters of this book are those in which the author carries out detailed studies of twenty-six illustrations of the birth of Julius Caesar, dating from the late thirteenth century, and of a number of late fifteenth-century German woodcuts of the birth of the Antichrist. In the absence of any tradition to guide illustrators in what to show, the scenes of Caesar’s birth are surprisingly accurate, although revealing wide variation in the position of the mother and of the incision. In particular, contemporary belief that the mother could not survive met an obstacle in the tradition that Caesar’s mother died during his Gallic campaigns; as a result, illustrators hedged their bets in her representation. Most important for the author’s argument, however, is the change in the personnel of the birth chamber; illustrations of Caesar’s birth up to 1400 show only midwives present, but after this date men are seen performing the operation.

This point leads on to the more familiar topic of the marginalisation of women in obstetrics, here set in the dual context of the redefinition of professional boundaries and the rise in accusations of witchcraft. The author argues from the iconographic material that men’s entry into the birth chamber comes earlier than has previously been thought, Caesarian section representing the first stage in the process. The role of the midwife in this context was doubly problematic; by cutting the body, she veered towards the domain of the surgeon, while by making the decision whether or not to perform a Caesarean she was responsible for the baptism, and thus the salvation, of the child.

*Not of woman born* is, as already indicated, strongest on the iconographic representation of Caesarean birth. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski is less effective in her handling of the early texts;