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Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day, by Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell (CUP, 2018) [Book Review]

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Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day, ed by Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). ISBN-10: 1107068029 ISBN-13: 978-1107068025 766 pages £94.99

If this ambitious volume had been published in the lifetime of Louise Bourgeois Boursier (1563–1636), it would likely have been called something like *The Secrets of Generation* and contained a compendium of the inherited and new empirical thinking and ideas about the reproductive body. It would also be more than likely to contain some captivating images, woodcut or copperplate engravings. The inspiration from these antecedents is clear as *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* is both substantial at 766 pages, weighing well over 2kgs, and richly illustrated with 163 black and white illustrations, and 40 colour images. In scope, it aims to cover ideas from ‘conception to cloning’ and from ‘pregnancy to populations’. Before the nineteenth century the term ‘reproduction’ was not used by writers describing procreation, instead they used ‘generation’ which is ‘an active making, and the authors likened the genesis of new beings to artisanal processes such as brewing, baking and moulding clay (p. 4). Exploring the fact that we now think about procreation in terms of reproduction is one of the driving forces of this volume. While mainly focussed on Western traditions, the volume includes essays on Egypt and the Near East, Islamic medicine, colonialism and imperialism, and ends with Nick Hopwood’s essay on globalization.

The book opens with a short overall introduction ‘Reproduction in History’ and then is organised into five chronological parts, each with its own introduction. Beginning with antiquity, Part I ‘Inventing Generation’, is focussed on Graeco-Roman antiquity, and engages with ideas which would become the bedrock of medicinal understandings for well over a millennium; Part II ‘Generation Reborn and Reformed’ is most familiar for scholars of early modern midwifery with essays from astrology and scholastic theological ideas on fetuses and children to innate heat and the emergence of population; Part III ‘Inventing Reproduction’ includes essays as diverse as ‘Love Lives of Plants’ to a reappraisal of the rise of man-midwifery in the eighteenth century; Part IV ‘Modern Reproduction’ is concerned with the period 1848-1939 and features two essays with modern in their titles: ‘Modern Infertility’ which argues that there was a discernible change in ideas about infertility around the turn of the twentieth century and ‘Modern Ignorance’ which tracks the major changes ‘in the production and consumption of medical knowledge’ in the last three centuries (p. 483). Part V, ‘Reproduction Centre Stage’, includes discussion of challenging topics such as eugenics, thalidomide (p. 570) and the technologies of abortion.

An innovative element of this volume are the forty exhibits, printed on high quality glossy leaves, which are normally double page spreads featuring a photograph of a material item, from a Roman uterine amulet, or a page of John Dee's Diary showing entries recording his wife, Jane's, menstrual cycle, to the 1950s lab which pioneered accurate pregnancy testing using live frogs, and a reproduction of the front page of the *Daily Mail* from July 1978 when Louise Brown the first 'test tube' baby was born. The images come with a short article explaining the image and a further reading section should the reader wish to learn more about each entry.

In this structure and format it differs from earlier large scale Cambridge medical humanities collections, such as Roy Porter's edited collection *Cambridge Illustrated History of Medicine* (1996), because each author in that volumes was responsible for a lengthy chapter which is effectively a section, whereas *Reproduction*, as described above, has sections made up of groupings of short analytical essays. The editors have drawn together a team of almost 70 contributors from across a range of academic disciplines. It is pitched to appeal to the student or non-specialist reader and is written in an engaging and accessible style to reflect this. It is the sort of compendium readers can dip in and out of, reading, for example, a short essay by Salim Al-Gailani on the rise of hospital deliveries, one day, to one revisiting the rise of man-midwives by Mary Fissell, or Helen King on women and doctors in ancient Greece, or flicking through some exhibition pieces another. Reading any of the essays will surely leave the reader better informed, often with something new to think about.

Inevitably, even for a volume as substantial as this one, there are some gaps and topics which merited inclusion such as the symphysiotomy scandal in which a significant number of Irish women in the twentieth century were subjected to an unwarranted and sometimes non-consensual medical procedure which left them physically impaired,^[1] and the emerging scandal of the vaginal mesh repairs which has seen thousands of American women suing the manufacture after experiencing debilitating complications affecting their ability to walk, have sex and in some cases work.^[2] This redress to law has now been taken up by women in the UK suing the NHS. While it might be arguable that the vaginal mesh scandal is somewhat tangential to the topic of this volume, 'Hospital Birth', discussed above, mentions the calls by nineteenth-century Catholic physicians for more of the increasingly safe caesarean sections to reduce infant and maternal mortality in cases of obstructed delivery, but it was the case that symphysiotomy was used in preference to caesareans in many difficult births at this time, so an extra paragraph or two added here would have plugged that particular lacuna. In both instances, these procedures

can be beneficial but the lack of transparency about the full risks and potential long-term contraindication points to a lack of agency afforded to reproductive women in the twentieth century and beyond.

The richness of this work means that it is certain to become an essential resource for researchers across many disciplines. The collection will be of interest to historians, medical humanities students, student midwives, and social scientists as well as to the non-specialist reader with an interest in attitudes and practises pertaining to how we all came to be here across time. The understandable but high cost of this volume, at almost £100, works against the accessibility of the style of the book and will necessarily mean it is mainly to be found in university libraries rather than in public libraries or personal collections where such a comprehensive and fascinating volume would sit well.

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[1] See <https://nursingclio.org/2016/05/31/the-torture-began-symphysiotomy-and-obstetric-violence-in-modern-ireland/>

[2] See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39567240>