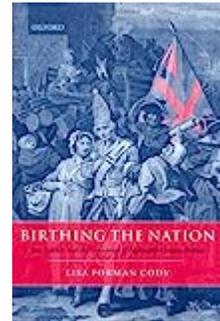


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa Forman Cody. *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 376 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-926864-1.



Reviewed by Lesley A. Hall (Wellcome Library, London)

Published on H-Albion (December, 2007)

This is an ambitious and exciting work which brings together a plethora of fascinating material, weaves unexpected and provocative connections, and provides us with new insights into issues of gender, race, and nationality as they developed along new pathways during the course of the “long eighteenth century.” It is full of good and astonishing things: as well as the already well-known case of the rabbit-woman of Guildford, we have the pregnant man of Southwark, frogs dressed in tight-fitting taffeta cullottes (in the interests of science), and the inadequately phallic nature of the letter “p” in the linguistic taxonomy of “long forgotten Welsh linguist Rowland Jones” (p. 259).

It is a study of a society undergoing dynamic changes over a range of areas, excavating hitherto unnoticed intersections among different fields of interest. This diverse account is held together by the thread of the increasing claims of men, in particular the “man-midwife,” to knowledge of the female reproductive body and control over its function. While refusing a simplistic narrative of a purposive and determined male agenda of gaining and maintaining control over women’s bodies, and with an acute awareness of how contested this remained, Cody depicts a radical shift from birth and “generation” being a female realm largely occluded from the male gaze, to the assertion of masculine scientific knowledge as the means of

understanding the continuation of the species, and the reproductive power of the uterus becoming increasingly the object of male and state surveillance and control. She also reveals the extent to which metaphors based in reproduction were productive of diverse meanings across numerous and sometimes far afield areas.

The book is arranged into thematic chapters, with a general chronological progression from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Following an introductory chapter, it examines the place of the midwife in early modern English society and addresses the question of the extent to which male medical practitioners were already treating gynecological disorders and dealing with complications in childbirth. It notes that, even given that this was happening, midwives during this period still were believed to have privileged and authoritative knowledge of female reproductive functioning, derived from their own gendered experience. However, as the next chapter suggests, the very idea of a realm of female knowledge occluded from the male gaze could generate monstrous fantasies, and particular examples proliferated around a number of late seventeenth-century “reproductive causes cÅ©lÃ”bres” (p. 46), such as the “Affair of the Poisons” at the court of Louis XIV involving the midwife Catherine Montvoisin, English Catholic midwife Elizabeth Cellier’s implication in the alleged “Meal-

Tub Plot,” more inchoate fears about abortion and infanticide, and the “Warming Pan Scandal” over the alleged smuggling in of a spurious heir for the childless consort of James II, Mary of Modena. Anxieties concerning Catholicism, particularly given the insecurity of the Protestant succession, were imbricated with a prurient fascination with the secret realm of the delivery room.

The chapter “‘Is not your Lordship with child too?’ Pregnant Fathers and Fathers of Science” provocatively analyzes the literary and satirical trope of male pregnancy and the rise of “molly” subculture, as well as responses to the investigations made by the nascent Royal Society, in terms of anxieties surrounding paternity and patriarchy. The virtuosi of the Royal Society “avidly discussed reproduction” (p. 96) from the outset, although their early interest in reproductive freaks modulated into embryological studies, microscopic observations of sperm, and experiments on the genitalia of cadavers, as they sought to formulate general rules through examining resemblances across different forms of life. But they were also satirized for “myopic and useless sexual obsession” (p. 113), an effeminate passion for minutiae, and caricatured as perverse or deficient in manhood. (Cody mentions the satirical associations with sodomy that were sometimes made, but I wonder if there might also have been connections with the rise of the Onania panic.) Is it also possible that some of their experimental activities appeared to verge on those normally part of the female province of the household stillroom (Lady Ranelagh’s Receipt Book in the Wellcome Library certainly suggests that “my brother Mr Boyle” sometimes joined her there), and thus inappropriate to their gender?[1]

While Antony van Leeuwenhoek’s studies of semen caused considerable excitement (the misrepresentation of his actual findings in the pervasive visual imagery of little beings preformed in the spermatozoa suggests that modern misreporting of scientific advances has a long and inglorious history), motherhood was also the object of intense interest. Reproductive anomalies provided one way into this still hidden realm. Monstrous births were of intense interest, and a complex set of disputed positions was taken up by men of learning over the body of Mary Toft, a poor woman of Surrey who allegedly gave birth to rabbits, which she attributed to her maternal impressions during pregnancy. The lines were not always drawn between believer and skeptic where the present day might have expected them.

Anomalous reproduction surfaces once more in the

account of the pregnant man of Southwark, Edward Mitchell, alleged to be “big with child.” Although this claim originated in a clerical error, Cody indicates that it had significant resonance in a very specific context of anxieties around masculinity and patriarchal authority at that particular point (1766) of George III’s reign. Economic and social changes were disrupting traditional barriers of gender and class: Queen Charlotte herself broke with tradition by choosing William Hunter to attend her fourth lying-in.

Cody positions the man-midwife and his (much-contested and controversial) rise as the epitome of the changes she describes. Individual man-midwives play a central role in her narrative: besides their obvious role in establishing a male foothold in the realm of female reproductive mystery, they also had claims to a wider allegiance with the developments in scientific knowledge of the mysteries of life. She provides a beautifully nuanced demonstration that the man-midwife’s claim to authority involved a careful balancing act between his indubitably masculine intellectual and rational grasp of the mechanisms of obstetrics, and his incorporation of the more feminine emotional powers of empathy and compassion—a positive reading, in fact, of the androgynous or hermaphroditic caricature of this liminal figure. She also shows that the man-midwife, far from being a power-mad member of the existing medical elite, was usually a member of some more marginalized group, in particular the Scots following the Act of Union. These were men who themselves lacked access to the networks of professional influence and patronage.

Besides positioning themselves as a new sort of medical practitioner manifesting a new version of masculinity, they were also involved in the attempt to create a new unified national identity as British rather than English and Scottish (or non-Anglican gentleman), “presented as far more cosmopolitan and enlightened than provincial, xenophobic Englishness” (p. 159). But the Scottish man-midwives were also able to exploit dual or even multiple identities “to interact with and cross the boundaries between different factions and categories of people.” This raises a question of whether this mobility and ability to cross these borders to some extent was due to their place outside the obvious markers of the English class system—a point made for a somewhat later period by Elizabeth Gaskell in *Wives and Daughters* (1866), in which Dr. Gibson, by virtue of his Scottish degree and accent, acquires a social acceptability in a British provincial setting which would probably not have been extended to a British medical practitioner of similarly humble origins.

A theme which recurs across several chapters is that, rather than assertions of difference, what was often taking place was a recognition of likenesses across gender, races, and species. The formation of new identities often seems to be about finding a suitable middle way between excesses in either direction. If Catholicism as a sinister covert and authoritarian conspiracy continued to be seen as a threat, so also did the ultra-democratic “enthusiasm” of Methodism.

There is an underlying question about appropriation and assimilation. The finest sight the Scots man-midwife saw continued to be the high road leading to England, and London in particular. The traffic in the other direction appears to have been minimal. As man-midwives (and the new forms of masculinity they pioneered) arrogated to themselves such female-gendered virtues as sensibility, this was to unite these to their masculine learned professional skills. If this new profession did work closely with (some) female midwives, and the major obstetric charities and lying-in hospitals founded during the latter part of the eighteenth century relied on the labor of midwives, this previously independent cadre of female professionals was thus being brought under male

control rather than retaining its traditional claims to particular independent authority in matters of generation. Women, indeed, came to be generally seen increasingly as passive, “the ... vulnerable, weak, naturally maternal, and victimized sex” (p. 291). Though this purportedly gave them claims to male protection, Cody shows how various safeguards were stripped from particularly vulnerable groups of women in an attempt to exert control over the breeding of the nation.

Cody includes a rich range of visual materials in the copious illustrations, providing sophisticated readings of the imagery which give full weight to the complexity of the material and the layers of embedded meanings. The extent to which her story is one about contradictions and what seems to the twenty-first-century reader the intersection of clashing incompatible views is perhaps epitomized in the account of Charles White, who meticulously delineated the gradations of racial hierarchy, yet actively denounced the slave trade. (A paperback edition is planned for release in 2008.)

Note

[1]. Wellcome Library, MS.1340.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Lesley A. Hall. Review of Cody, Lisa Forman, *Birth of the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13928>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.