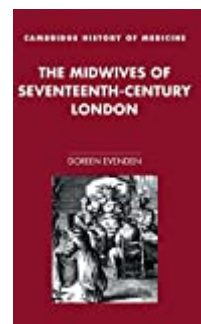


Doreen Evenden. *The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 260 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-66107-2.



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Countering Gamp: The Training and Status of Seventeenth-Century London Midwives

Countering Gamp: The Training and Status of Seventeenth-Century London Midwives

Doreen Evenden's addition to the scholarship on early modern English midwifery draws upon a wide range of source materials to create a detailed in-depth description of the training, skills, practice, socioeconomic class, and status of midwives who practiced in London during the seventeenth century. Enhancing the work of scholars including Jean Donnison and Adrian Wilson, who relied mainly on contemporary or secondary published literature, Evenden uses primary data to document the licensing of midwives, which was the responsibility of the Church of England throughout the seventeenth century. She discusses the lengthy informal apprenticeships that prepared midwives for licensing and describes midwives' clienteles in terms of social class, occupation, geographical location, and referral networks. Using records from twelve representative London parishes, Evenden profiles midwives' age at licensing, marital status, spouses' occupations, children, literacy, fees, homes, and possessions; she also describes immigrant midwives who practiced in London. Following this overview, Even-

den provides details about the lives of 76 midwives who served these parishes. The book concludes with a discussion of the 18th-century rise of the man-midwife and concomitant decline of the confidence, status, and practices of female midwives; it ends with an "Epilogue" chronicling the development of London lying-in hospitals.

The strength of this book is its wealth of data extracted from primary source materials. From ecclesiastical and parish records, court depositions, diaries, letters, and biographies, Evenden collected the names of approximately 1,200 seventeenth-century London midwives, which are recorded in an Appendix. These sources document the licensing and visitation processes through which the Church of England regulated the practice of midwifery. They illustrate midwives' training "in a well-developed, albeit unofficial, system of apprenticeship under senior midwives" (p. 16). They both enable Evenden to put human faces on individual women who lived and worked more than 300 years ago and, at the same time, support her generalizations about who these women were, what they did, and how they were per-

ceived by the wider community. Furthermore, they amply support Evenden's argument that it was the norm for seventeenth-century London midwives to receive significant and appropriate training before undertaking independent practice.

It might be argued that the book's greatest weakness stems from its strength; the reader is buried under an avalanche of details, and is hard pressed to figure out what it all means. The author misses some opportunities to help in this matter, offering (for example) 1,200 names and dates of London midwives without summarizing or analyzing the data in tabular or narrative form. Similarly, the nearly thirty pages of brief descriptions of the circumstances of seventy-six seventeenth-century London midwives offer the reader rather a lot of semi-digested data followed by a cursory two-page "overview" that fails to make the best possible use of this material.

Furthermore, despite evidence provided by clients' testimonials and bibliographical references to diaries and autobiographies kept by child-bearing women, Evenden does not provide much information about seventeenth-century mothers' experience of childbirth—supervised either by midwives or medical men. Inclusion of this information would have strengthened the author's description of what went on in the birth chamber and her arguments for the superior competence of midwives.

In this book, Evenden accomplishes her primary goal of countering the stereotype, perpetuated by medical men and (she argues) historians alike, of the early modern English midwife as "ignorant, incompetent, and poor" (p. 1)—someone who "lacked any verifiable training and carried out her work with minimal competence" (p. 5). Evenden clearly illustrates the concerns and expectations of seventeenth century ecclesiastical authorities, midwives, and patients regarding midwives' skill and competence. She demolishes any potential urge on the part of the reader to give male practitioners credit

for anything except greed, chicanery, and opportunism in their interactions with midwives and child-bearing women. However, she also misses important opportunities to consider both midwifery and male medical practice within a wider cultural, social, intellectual, and professional context.

For example, in her eagerness to convince the reader that midwives' licenses had more to do with skill and professional ethics than with spiritual orthodoxy in baptism or possible association with witchcraft, Evenden ignores the central role of the midwife as witness. Both of the midwife's oaths reprinted in Appendices A and B of the book emphasize this responsibility, which was related to matters including paternity, inheritance, infanticide, and parish relief—issues arguably of greater importance to seventeenth-century authorities than the midwife's technical skill or knowledge. Indeed, observation of this significant role supports Evenden's contention that midwives were trusted members of the community who were present at almost every birth. Similarly, her argument that development of lying-in hospitals in the eighteenth century was a successful strategy concocted by male practitioners to destroy the practices of London midwives and take over their patients ignores both increasing institutionalization of medicine and growth of interest in "scientific" medicine in the period. It is tempting to ask whether it would have been more satisfactory for eighteenth-century physicians and surgeons to have ignored child-bearing women as beings unworthy of their notice.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London* is an excellent piece of historical research, illuminating poorly understood issues associated with the history of midwifery and childbearing. In addition, Evenden has provided a valuable and detailed account of early modern English women's paid work.

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