

## Book Reviews

institutional programmes, and social ideologies that constitute the “origins” of twentieth-century psychology, will provide an alternative historiography. The essays do not establish a connected alternative history to Boring’s; rather, they illustrate the sort of work which is emerging as historians accept that the development of a science is as “problematic” as any other form of social change. The collection is therefore an excellent indication of recent work (North American and European) in the history of psychology. The choice of the term “problematic”, perhaps deliberately, leaves the contributors free to work with quite different historiographic orientations.

The essays of most relevance to medical historians are probably Kurt Danziger on ‘Mid-nineteenth-century British psycho-physiology’ (embarrassingly enough for me, since my thesis was on the very topic, subtitled ‘a neglected chapter in the history of psychology’!), which brings out – though somewhat uncritically – the medical social setting; a summary restatement by Frank Sulloway of his argument linking Freud and biology; Alexandre Métraux on the ideology of French crowd psychology; and Siegfried Jaeger on William Preyer and the origins of child psychology. These last two essays illustrate extremely well the “problematic” quality of psychology as science, which the editors have sought to bring out in their own introduction and epilogue.

Unfortunately, some of the contributions are rushed and superficial: thus Robert Richards (‘Darwin and the biologising of moral behavior’) and Lorraine Daston (‘The theory of will versus the science of mind’ in late nineteenth-century British psychology) tackle important philosophical issues with a rather arbitrary deployment of historical material. (Throughout the book, citation and proof-reading have been rushed.) But the editors have done well to get a contribution from M. G. Yaroshevskii, restating in historical detail the Soviet view that I. M. Sechenov founded a distinctive school of psychology (treating “the organism as a whole in its interaction with the environment”) in contrast to western mechanist and functionalist schools. Another useful contrast comes in Helio Carpintero’s account of the resistance to modernism in Spain. There are, of course, also several essays on German psychology, notably R. Steven Turner’s on Helmholtz and disciplinary development.

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EDWARD SHORTER, *A history of women's bodies*, London, Allen Lane, 1983, 8vo, pp. xvi, 398, £14.95.

ROSALIND K. MARSHALL, *Virgins and viragos. A history of women in Scotland from 1080 to 1980*, London, Collins, 1983, 8vo, pp. 365, illus., £13.50.

It is their partially shared title *A history of women . . .*, that singles out these books for joint consideration. Few works, however, could be so different in method, style, and conclusion. Shorter’s book is, in one sense, unrepentently presentist. Armed with a biological definition of woman and the vocabulary of various scientific and medical specialities, principally bacteriology and obstetrics, he analyses in a pugilistic and angry style what he perceives to be the unique corporeal experiences of sexually active European women from the Renaissance to current “sexual liberation”. Shorter’s conclusion that, so to speak, women have never had it so good, will not go down well among feminist historians. Nor will his use of modern scientific categories as tools of historical analysis. The latter, however, is not a practice to which feminists themselves are immune. Shorter’s *biological* definition of women, in other words by their reproductive structures and role, is one shared by many feminist historians who, in different circumstances, gleefully expose a sexist ideology in science and medicine.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A historical work that self-consciously adopts what has been called an *essentialist* view of woman is, Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin, *The nineteenth century woman*, London, Croom Helm, 1978. The essentialist position has been elegantly analysed and criticized by Penelope Brown and L. J. Jordanova in ‘Oppressive dichotomies: The nature/culture debate’, in Cambridge Women Studies Group, *Women in society*, London, Virago Press, 1981, pp. 225–241.

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Shorter's story is essentially one of increasing liberation, which all women, except latter-day intellectuals, have recognized and unrepentantly indulged in. Once upon a time, women who married and bore children suffered, suffered a great deal in fact. Multiple births, childbed fever, vaginal discharges, fistulae, or prolapses were borne, uniquely, by this section of the population, whatever their class. Such shared horrors, Shorter holds, inevitably threw women into each other's arms, the company of one's sisters was preferable to any other. Things might not have been as bad as they were, however, in spite of rickets and malnutrition, if it had not been for the dead hand of the traditional midwife. Here Shorter firmly sets his face against historical interpretations which find any virtues in pre-medical midwifery. Indeed, it was the arrival of the man-midwives, followed by modern surgery and germ theory, that delivered women from the dread tortures of the childbed. This deliverance, allied to efficient contraception and abortion, actually made women the mistresses of their own bodies, and, in turn, made possible a modern revolution in sexuality, and motherhood: activities to be anticipated, controlled, and enjoyed, not endured. This bold thesis Shorter buttresses with an avalanche of evidence from a host of sources in different countries. Some of it might seem a little slight, but much of it is dense and will require more than indignant polemic to refute.

At first glance, Rosalind Marshall's book seems to be about the inhabitants of a different planet. The *Virgins and viragos* of the title must surely have been a publisher's afterthought; I counted only one virgin and one doubtful virago in the whole book. The work is a wonderfully detailed account of the everyday experience of women in Scotland since the middle ages. It is based on extensive reading of primary sources and, almost inevitably, says a great deal about Scottish aristocratic and bourgeois life and little about anything else. In fact, reproductive unity notwithstanding, Marshall's book is about people in a particular *class*, and their social definition as women within a power network. It is not about timeless, biological woman. The book's effect is to tell us about these particular women and how they dealt with a variety of experiences and what meanings they held. Whereas Shorter describes the material condition of existence and leaves the rest (almost inevitably because of his sources) to our twentieth-century imagination, Marshall tells us what it meant to be a woman in Scottish society. She sets out a framework we might expect, a Scottish law that seemingly served predominantly male interests, a church and an educational system that upheld male over female privileges, etc. But what she also shows is how, within this, men and women negotiated a harsh, brutal, and unfair world *together*, and that the most important institution for doing this was marriage. Although marriage might have been a "total institution" in Scottish life, she takes a Goffmanesque view of the way that the inmates often used it to satisfy their *mutual* needs and to face the horrors and share the joys of the world together. Love, play, work, the desire for children (in Marshall's world barrenness is a curse, in Shorter's a blessing), all figure in the lives of the people she has discovered. Of course, the marriage lottery might go wrong; men might beat their wives, be impotent (presumably a godsend to Shorter's women), either party might commit adultery, and many women would have to bear the pains and suffer the sequelae of childbirth. But Scottish culture did provide resources with which to do this as well as providing a framework that gave meaning to these events. Somehow, the raw but stimulating statistical noise of Shorter's work has to be orchestrated into the *historical* world depicted by Marshall.

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