

## Book Reviews

as did, he said, "the discreter sort of doctor". Smellie, the obstetrician, never carried out such a section.

This book continues the historical account of the operation into the early modern period and summarizes the changing indications for it and the lowering of mortality and morbidity in the Copenhagen hospitals. The book is handsomely printed, is remarkably well illustrated, and has fine bibliographies and indices. A curious method of folding the uncut pages requires major surgery to examine the contents, which, like Caesarean section, leaves some damage behind.

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JOACHIM GABKA and EKKEHARD VAUBEL, *Plastic surgery, past and present. The origin and history of modern lines of incision*, Basle, Karger, 1983, 4to, pp. viii, 179, illus., SFr.295.00.

Plastic surgeons claim that they are the last of the "general" surgeons, since the reconstructive techniques in which they are particularly skilled can be applied to any part of the body. Drs Gabka and Vaubel are determined that they shall develop a sense of modesty, by making it clear that much of today's practice is directly based on the techniques of earlier generations. It would have been better if they had kept to their subtitle, although they omit the work of Langer and others in the nineteenth century, which, however controversial, has an important part in the history of surgical incisions. They insist that their book is not intended as a history of plastic surgery, but the useful material on incisions is scattered in a great deal of potted general medical and surgical history. There are some nice photographs of some of the authors' successful operations.

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G. K. BEHLMER, *Child abuse and moral reform in England, 1870–1908*, Stanford, Calif. Stanford University Press, 1982, 8vo, pp. ix, 320, illus., \$30.00.

What to do about the "residuum" – the 10 per cent of the population living at or below the level of subsistence – was a constant preoccupation of middle-class reformers in late-Victorian and Edwardian England. Part of this concern was directed to the subject of child abuse and its connexion with alcoholism, prostitution, and "baby farming" or wet-nursing. The extent to which this issue touched the sentiments and beliefs of middle-class zealots can be gauged from this scholarly and concise history of the formation and development of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Behlmer's study presents a clear picture of the motivation of key reformers and their legislative and investigative work on behalf of children at risk in the generation prior to the First World War.

The most striking finding of this research is that, while sharing many contemporary assumptions about the harsh domestic environment of the very poor, the NSPCC also recognized that child abuse was not solely a problem of the unskilled, but extended to families supported by men earning good wages, and occasionally to the homes of their social superiors. This hardly justifies Behlmer's claim that the NSPCC subscribed to a "theory of classless cruelty", but it does show that activists in this field did not simply parade middle-class prejudices in their thoughts on the aetiology of degradation. In this respect, they were certainly the forerunners of those in the 1950s who revived public interest in the "battered-child syndrome".

To suggest that well-paid men were capable of brutality is one thing; to argue that an improvement in living standards would not necessarily reduce child abuse is another, and more problematic claim, which Behlmer appears to support in this study. And yet an improvement in material conditions does seem to be the most likely explanation for the decline in prosecutions for child abuse (and interest in the question) after 1914. It was one of the ironies of the 1914–18 war that its waging unintentionally eliminated a substantial part of the "residuum", which even the interwar depression did not resurrect. In its place came "special areas" and "problem families", but the pre-war pattern of urban squalor, malnutrition, and crime did not survive past the Armistice. This is not to say that brutality of any sort is simply a reflection of economic

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conditions, but that changes in housing, work, and welfare in this period cannot be dismissed as relatively unimportant influences on patterns of family stress.

Behlmer's study does not directly address this problem, since it adopted an institutional approach to social history. Consequently, the history of social policy is traced through the papers of the NSPCC, which, in itself, is a valuable exercise. But it entails costs as well as benefits. One of the costs is to place the history of social thought and the history of social and economic phenomena on separate peaks, each in majestic isolation from the other. Another cost is to narrow the range of sources to those which touch on the central organization and its work. Images of childhood in popular literature, music hall ballads, and street theatre could tell us much about the climate of opinion within which the NSPCC and allied groups had to work. Similarly, the phenomenon of cruelty within schools was widely discussed at least since the appearance of *Tom Brown's schooldays*, and a discussion of this theme would have reinforced the view that child abuse was no respecter of class or position. While contributing much to our understanding of Victorian and Edwardian social reform, it is to be hoped that Professor Behlmer will cast his net further afield in later research to illuminate more fully this facet of Victorian mentality.

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### CORRECTION

*Medical History*, October 1983, p. 443: James C. Whorton's *Crusaders for fitness. The history of American health reformers* was first published in 1982. The statement "reprint of 1942 ed." is incorrect.