Book Reviews

Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain
By Hilary Marland

This is a scholarly and thorough book which is also a pleasure to read. Marland writes from a historian’s perspective and, as is often recognised now, this encompasses consideration of the relationships between society, culture and ideas at specific historical moments, or in unfolding historical processes. In her research for the book, Marland explored a range of historical sources—asylum casenotes, diaries, letters, medical texts—to build a complex and engaging picture of how Victorian British society viewed women, motherhood and mental health. She argues that puerperal insanity emerged as a specific and distinct concept in the Victorian period, and shows how closely this related to the nature of British society at the time: in particular, the (sometimes contradictory) attitudes towards women as meant by nature to be mothers and nurturers but also as essentially physiologically and socially weak and vulnerable. Modernity and civilisation is also seen in this period as somehow undermining women’s natural capacities to cope with childbirth and infant care, particularly breastfeeding. A story is revealed where the ideas of insanity, cause and treatment are caught up with professional and gendered rivalries between midwives and obstetricians, and obstetricians and alienists. Marland notes how the idea of childbirth as inherently dangerous was emphasised at this time, as obstetrics was establishing itself, just as lying-in hospitals and asylums were growing in number and role. In the early Victorian period, though, ideas about causes and treatment were relatively holistic, including social, emotional and physiological issues, and women received relatively good care, since puerperal insanity was seen as curable and the aim of treatment was to restore order in domestic and social life through restoring order in the woman herself. Marland’s observations connect nicely with anthropological work that looks at the ways in which the body is employed to map, symbolise and ritualise ideas about the social order and the cosmological order. In this way, the book does what all good histories do—it not merely tells a story of the past but it connects events to their context and allows us to consider the implications of the past in the present.

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A View from the Tower and the Township: Post colonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse
Edited by Laura Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan
London: Routledge, 2002

‘Letting Them Die’: Why HIV/AIDS Prevention Programmes Fail
By Catherine Campbell
Oxford: James Currey, 2003

The anthology edited by Donaldson and Pui-Lan offers a multi-ethnic and multi-religious approach to exploring ‘the often uneasy intersections between post colonialism and feminist religious discourse’ (p. 28). As such, much of the book is concerned with the centrality of western secular and religious beliefs in the construction, and sustaining, of colonial feminist ideologies in a post-colonial world.

Given the increasing polarisation, post 9/11 and the Iraq war, between a largely secular/Christian west and Islamic east, the essays on Islam and feminism are of particular use. As President Chiraq prepared to ban the wearing of headscarves, Jewish skull-caps and ‘overly large’ crosses in French schools, Meyda Yeğenoglu’s essay on the positioning of the veil in Muslim women’s perceptions of selfhood and identity is timely, as is Miriam Cooke’s thoughtful contribution to the often contested debate surrounding Islam and feminism. To complete the circle, Laura Levitt’s historical examination of Judaism and liberalism in France offers a Jewish perception of negotiating a European liberal environment. Other noteworthy contributions explore footbinding, the ‘body’ as a socio-historical construct, and the representation and presentation of black women’s bodies as a metaphor for both enslavement and liberation.

A concern, however, in what is otherwise a timely and erudite contribution to a complexity of interlocking debates, is one of exclusion; that while much is said and opined on behalf of the majority of the world’s women by the authors, little is actually heard from them in person.

Such a charge could not be leveled at Catherine Campbell’s valuable contribution to the HIV/AIDS debate. Her book, ‘Letting Them Die’—Why HIV/AIDS Prevention Programmes Fail, a collaborative evaluation of a seven year community-based HIV/AIDS programme in South Africa, is grounded in such excluded voices.

Through the interlinked stories of four groups: mineworkers, prostitutes, young people and ‘stakeholders’ in the programme, Campbell paints a vivid and complex picture of daily life in the township of ‘Summertown’ —the fictitious name given to the township where the programme was implemented. As the author comments: ‘Each of these stories contributes one piece to the complex puzzle of why … people continue to knowingly dice with death by taking sexual health risks, and why it is so difficult to alter this situation.’ (p. 2).

In line with a majority of current grassroots interventions, ‘Summertown’ was predicated upon a belief in the twin mantras of participation and partnership. Campbell offers a comprehensive, and much needed, evaluation of the veracity of such ‘articles of faith’ based upon their practical application over a period of years. And the news she brings—as the title of her book makes abundantly clear—is not encouraging. Indeed, some of those involved in the programme were against so frank and forthright an evaluation on the grounds that it would make ‘too depressing’ and negative reading. I am grateful, as I am sure many others will be, that the ‘spin’ lobby, whatever their good intention, lost this particular vote.
For no matter how valid concepts of community-based initiatives might seem to theorists—and Campbell is at pains not to discredit such concepts but rather to critique them as ‘lessons learned’ for future initiatives—the reality on the ground is often a lot tougher and more contested than theorists, or indeed funders and CEOs, might wish for or imagine.

As Campbell deftly unravels the complexities of multi-stakeholder involvement—government, municipalities, donors, practitioners, local businesses, and the Summertown ‘community’—a vivid picture emerges of the difficulties such programmes (pace the rhetoric) actually face in trying to enable beneficent change to take place. Diverse stakeholders can, and often do, pursue different and competing agendas (many seemingly unaware of the fact), and often to the detriment of the community-based initiatives they purport to champion. Indeed, at one level this book is a valuable and salutary essay on the conflictual and gendered nature of power in post-apartheid South Africa, and its effect upon what might be loosely described as a ‘grass-roots’ development process.

As for the socially and economically marginalised—the supposed beneficiaries at the heart of the programme—their stories vividly illustrate how and why poverty and gender inequality conspire to limit their opportunity to challenge the status quo, and, in this instance, to change sexual attitudes and behaviour. In such a hard, bleak environment, liberal notions of ‘community’, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ can sound very hollow indeed. Unless such social, economic and gendered inequalities, and the limitation (and potential) of multi-stakeholder partnerships in grass-roots programmes, are more effectively addressed and synthesised, initiatives like ‘Summertown’ will largely fail to help ameliorate the spread of AIDS in such marginalised communities.

Although arguably the most important practitioner critique to have appeared in recent years, this is not a book just for NGOs—though it should be made compulsory reading in every development agency! On the contrary, this landmark book is intended for anyone and everyone interested in the complexity of issues which help shape the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the reality behind the rhetoric of many grass-roots ‘development’ programmes. As a qualitative practitioner recently working in South Africa around issues of HIV/AIDS and livelihoods, I salute the author’s intellectual honesty in telling ‘it’ the way it is. I urge readers to go out and buy a copy—you won’t regret it!

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