

Book Reviews

erosion of Catholic opposition made politicians less reluctant to contemplate decriminalizing contraception. This was accomplished in the 1969 revision of the Criminal Code but, the book convincingly argues, it did not end state interference in the bedrooms of the nation. Abortion remains a contentious issue and the provision of contraceptives has more to do with the male-dominated interests of government and business than with meeting women's needs.

The authors make no claim to be comprehensive. The bulk of their material relates to the interwar years and concerns particular regions of the country. An in-depth study remains to be written and this useful survey, which says little about the shifts in family structure that the demographic changes entailed, should prompt further enquiry.

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HILARY BOURDILLON, *Women as healers: a history of women and medicine*, Women in History, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. 48, illus., £3.50, (paperback).

Intended for use in schools, this copiously illustrated (if carelessly proof-read) book discusses women in medicine from Ancient Egypt to the present in 48 pages, including suggestions for projects and further reading, without pretending to analyse the subtler issues. Hilary Bourdillon must be praised for avoiding the obvious pitfalls inherent in the subject. Instead of the tunnel vision which sees the female contribution to medicine as defined by their relationship to formal medical structures, there is an emphasis on the importance of home care and the role of women as community healers, although more could have been made of women's philanthropic activity and their involvement in the world of entrepreneurial, rather than folk, "alternative medicine". Her description of Hannah Wolley as "upper-class" could be argued with, literacy not being coterminous with elevated social status, as well as her statement that the involvement of upper-class women in health care had declined by the eighteenth century. Incidentally, "Lady Montagu" is not the correct way of referring to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu! The treatment of witchcraft is commendably moderate, avoiding the excesses often perpetrated when dealing with this subject. This is a useful if elementary introduction to the female contribution to health care.

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LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN, *Who goes first? The story of self-experimentation in medicine*, Wellingborough, Northants, Equation, 1988, 8vo, pp. x, 430, £8.99 (paperback).

Lawrence Altman thinks that most doctors are unjustly dubious about the value of self-experimentation. He aims to rectify this impression by cataloguing the numerous contributions such experiments have made to medicine. It is dramatic stuff. Werner Forssmann wrote himself into the history books by pushing a catheter into his own heart (and struggling with a friend who feared for his safety in the process). Frederick Prescott and Scott Smith paralysed themselves with curare, and lay helpless and frightened, unable even to blink. Thomas Brittingham transfused leukaemia cells into himself—despite the danger that the disease might be transmissible—at a time when no cure existed for the disease.

There is more than a hint of hagiography here. While self-experimenters are elevated to medical sainthood, those who fail to come up to the standard are cast out of the elect. Altman is keen to denounce Walter Reed, the man who—contrary to medical mythology—did not expose himself to infection with yellow fever. Reed, with two other members of the US Yellow Fever Commission sent to Cuba, pledged to allow themselves to be bitten by mosquitoes to see if they carried yellow fever. Only Reed reneged, mysteriously leaving for the States after making his promise. One of the others, Jesse Lazear, died after succumbing to the fever.

In his foreword, Lewis Thomas sees self-experimenters as models for future generations of doctors. The book, he suggests, should be required reading for all medical students. This paperback edition may indicate that some publishers hope that Thomas's wish will come true; some medical ethicists may not.

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