

FOR HER OWN GOOD: 150 YEARS OF THE EXPERTS' ADVICE TO WOMEN. BARBARA EHRENREICH AND DEIRDRE ENGLISH. Anchor Press/Doubleday: New York, 1979. Pp. 325.

For Her Own Good is required reading for anyone interested in the history of women and the history of ideas. It focuses on nineteenth and twentieth century prescriptive literature for women, literature which, of course, was not new. Women had been getting advice for centuries about the way in which they should conduct themselves. The modern tracts were different only in that the authority was new. Science has usurped the role of the church.

Ehrenreich and English argue that in the nineteenth century the old social and economic order collapsed, defeated by the market economy which had been gaining strength for centuries. The result was the decline of patriarchy. Women were no longer economically central to the family and its individual members were being syphoned into special interest groups according to age and sex. The process has been described time and again by the historians of women. Patriarchy was replaced by a new stress on outside authority. Women were relegated to the home to provide the nurturing necessary for psychic survival in a cold, competitive world which provided no room for human needs. There was, however, a major flaw in the new scenario - the capitalist market place did not intrinsically reject women. Nevertheless, if its demands did not, there emerged an authority which did. Science, in the guise of physicians and later psychologists and psychoanalysts, provided the artillery to keep women in the home.

It is at this point that *For Her Own Good* becomes fascinating for it is here that the authors begin their study of experts' advice to women. What their study

reveals is a deep seated desire on the part of Americans for guidance, to have someone with authority tell them what to do and how to behave. It was believed scientists were the best trained for this because only science had true objectivity. Although the "women's" experts had the aura of scientific legitimacy around them, their theories were only tenuously based on scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, their pronouncements became analogous to religious belief, something to be taken on faith because they appeared to be backed by the god Science.

At the turn of the century physicians, as scientists, tried to account for the apparent ill-health of women with an evolutionary theory (the latest in scientific knowhow) which made women passive and dictated to by the biological imperative of motherhood. Physicians argued that women were dominated by their reproductive system. The result was a significant increase in gynecological surgery and interference in childbirth. In the situation described by the authors women were the victims, physicians were the villains. However, reality was not quite that simple. The medical profession was not a monolith, it did not speak with one voice. There was strong opposition to surgical intervention by many physicians. Admittedly they eventually met defeat but their existence should be acknowledged for they were part of the mainstream of medical practice and cannot be dismissed as the remnants of homeopathy or Thompsonianism which the authors mention as the main opposition to intervention. What the authors *are* correct in stressing is the emphasis all groups in the medical profession placed on woman's maternal role. The profession provided what became a scientific rationale for woman's domestic place in society.

Since woman's place was the home, many women determined to acquire for it the prestige they felt it deserved—consequently their support for the domestic science movement and the emergence of a new group of experts, home economists. The movement was designed to legitimize and professionalize work in the home by stressing the application of scientific management, but it

failed. It did not make housewives professionals. Manufacturers increasingly took away their functions, offering appliances and convenience foods in their place. They even enticed the domestic science professionals into their employ to give their offerings credibility and the stamp of approval. This left little to women in the home beyond the most basic repetitive tasks.

While domestic scientists had tried to help woman in her homemaker role, they had ignored her nurturant responsibilities. Child care experts, in the guise of psychologists, concentrated on these and gave advice on how to raise children properly. In the early twentieth century the factory model became the goal with behaviourists stressing the need to mold the child in order to create a disciplined worker. With the 1920s permissiveness held sway linked as it was to the rise of consumerism and the encouragement of instant gratification. Free expression was the key and stress was placed on instinctual mother love, although the experts explained to women what their instincts were. No matter what the theory if anything went wrong, the mother was blamed, not the theory. When, in the 1950s, it was discovered that young American soldiers in Korean POW camps had quickly succumbed to brain washing, experts worried about whether American children were weak and decided mothers had been over-permissive and had interpreted their advice incorrectly.

In their study of the experts, Ehrenreich and English have portrayed women as victims, as passive agents being acted upon. Anyone familiar with the history of women knows this was not the case. This discrepancy focuses on one of the main problems of studying prescriptive literature. How do you determine how influential it was? A victimology interpretation is too simplistic to account for what was happening. Ideas are related to society and the needs of society. In her recent study *Psychoanalytic Politics*, Sherry Turkle has described the differences between the United States and France with respect to their reaction to Freud. In America his ideas were quickly accepted and watered down to make them serve the

American status quo. Freud quickly became part of the establishment and consequently hostile to those outside it, namely women. Hence the opposition of American women to Freudian analysis. In France, however, Freud was not accepted until the 1960s and, when he was, it was by the left. In France, Freudian theory is subversive to the status quo and as such has been taken up by feminists. Thus, in two different countries you have one man's theories interpreted in diametrically opposed ways to meet the needs of each society. It is the needs of the society, the context that has to be stressed in any study of ideas. This is the major weakness of *For Her Own Good*, for the context is lacking, a context which the authors of *For Her Own Good* have been unable to provide since they are overly dependent on secondary research. Nevertheless, with the research at their disposal, they have written a fascinating and provocative book which should make any reader think twice when next they hear pronouncements by so-called "experts" on women's role in society.

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**A NOT UNREASONABLE CLAIM:
WOMEN AND REFORM IN
CANADA, 1880s-1920s. LINDA KEALEY,
ED. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979. Pp. 233.**

Many of us have waited impatiently for almost four years for the publication of this book.¹ Although we could have wished for its earlier appearance, it has been worth the wait. The volume's contributors and editor represent some of the historians of Canada most actively and fruitfully engaged in researching, writing and promoting women's history. The fruits of that labour published here augur well, at the same time that they demonstrate the need, for continuing harvests.