Once in New York, Sims adopted a strategy common among emerging specialists in the US and Great Britain (those in continental Europe adopted rather different strategies): winning the financial support of local elites in order to establish specialist hospitals. As elsewhere, the advancement of medical science and practice was a major justification for such hospitals and for specialization more generally. But the need to attract private philanthropy required significantly greater emphasis on the practical benefits of specialities than was the case in Europe. The Woman's Hospital of the State of New York founded in 1855 attracted very wide support because the methods developed by Sims were considered an effective way to relieve common forms of suffering among women and thereby to enhance the family. None the less, the advancement of medicine through experimentation and education continued to be a major preoccupation of the medical staff and led to far more dangerous forms of surgery at the hospital, notably ovariotomy. If experimentation on slaves had been the basis of Sim's early surgical successes, experimentation on the poor Irish women who constituted the predominant patient population, was, in the view of the author, the basis for the hospital's continued medical stature. The culture of experimentation also led to the kinds of confrontation between doctors and lay philanthropists that were common in other American hospitals. The most interesting one discussed by the author had to do with the introduction of cancer patients to the hospital. This raises all sorts of unanswered questions about changing notions of "incurability" and their consequences during the nineteenth century, both within the institutions and culture of medicine and among the lay public.

By focusing narrowly on a single institution, this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of one segment of the gynaecological speciality then in the process of taking shape. And there is probably no better way to get at the foundational procedures of the speciality or the experiences of patients than through such detailed studies of individual institutions. But these have limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the most serious is that we get little sense from this book of how developments in New York articulated with other local and national efforts in the formation of the speciality. Nor do we learn to what extent the efforts of New York gynaecologists were typical of other kinds of specialists in that city and to what extent they were unique. Such limitations notwithstanding, a wealth of detail on the practices of early gynaecology in New York City make this book a significant addition to the historical literature.

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Mary Thomas (ed.), *Post-war mothers: childbirth letters to Grantly Dick-Read 1946–1956*, University of Rochester Press, 1997, pp. xiv, 248, illus., £35.00, $59.95 (1-878822-87-X).

During the first half of the twentieth century, in response to medical as well as social pressures, the management of childbirth became a highly technical process, eventually requiring hospitalization, forceps, uterine stimulants and anaesthesia, even for a normal delivery. English obstetrician Grantly Dick-Read helped to reverse this trend through publication of books such as *Revelation of childbirth*, *Introduction to motherhood*, and his best known work *Childbirth without fear.* Writing for public consumption, he described childbirth as a natural process, most successful when a woman was well informed, free of fear and anxiety, and physically and mentally trained to perform the manoeuvres required of her during the

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delivery. In such circumstances, he argued, childbirth occurred quickly, with few complications, limited discomfort, and little need for the medical intervention that had become a regular part of modern obstetrical practice. For Dick-Read a "natural birth" transcended medicine, having important social, if not religious, connotations. A pleasant and uncomplicated delivery, he believed, best prepared a woman psychologically for the responsibilities of motherhood.

Physicians criticized Dick-Read's theories for undermining established medical practice and for their lack of scientific content. Regardless, "natural childbirth" found favour among many women, who, in the aftermath of the Second World War had become distrustful of science and sought return to a simpler style of life. It is noteworthy that Benjamin Spock's *The common sense book of baby and child care*, published almost contemporaneously with Dick-Read's first book, had a similar message and reaped similar public acclaim.

No less important for Dick-Read's success, he understood patients. This point becomes clear in this collection of letters edited by Mary Thomas. Encouraged by his books, women from all parts of the world wrote to Dick-Read to describe their experience with pregnancy, childbirth, hospitals, and physicians, and to praise or criticize his theories of "natural birth". Dick-Read answered most of them. From this voluminous correspondence Thomas has selected representative letters to illustrate the hopes, fears, triumphs and tragedies of these women. Many are astonishingly candid. Dick-Read's replies, equally forthright and personal, suggest a physician of great warmth, understanding, and patience—characteristics that probably contributed greatly to the success of his methods in his own practice. They also reveal Dick-Read's messianic faith in his method, and his belief that a "natural" birth could transform society. His comments about other physicians, often critical if not scathing, help explain his unpopularity among colleagues.

Professor Thomas has chosen and organized her material well. She begins with an essay that includes pertinent biographical material about Dick-Read, and a historical review of modern obstetrical practice. Each of the remaining sections deals with a different issue: scientific childbirth, feelings of failure, success in natural childbirth, and disagreeing with the method, for example. Thomas introduces each group of letters with a short essay that puts the material into its social and medical context. The book is informative and interesting to read. Most importantly, it provides a wealth of insight and resource material for anyone interested in the evolution of childbirth practices in the twentieth century.

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Georg Berger, *Die Beratenden Psychiater des deutschen Heeres 1939 bis 1945*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 328, £33.00 (3-631-33296-3).

In the early 1970s Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, one of France's leading historians, famously prophesied that the computer would one day replace the historian. Perhaps he came to this conclusion after reading a German medical dissertation. At their best, German medical dissertations supply researchers with a wealth of information, rigorously tabulated, classified, footnoted and summarized, thus providing useful starting points for broader and more ambitious investigations. At their worst, however, they can be narrowly internalist studies that plug up minor cracks in the edifice of medical–historical scholarship. Both descriptions apply to Georg Berger's study of German military psychiatry in the Second World War.

Berger's work, a Freiburg medical

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