

Mothers and King Baby: Infant Survival and Welfare in an Imperial World: Australia 1880-1950. Philippa Mein Smith. (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1997). 330.

Philippa Mein Smith's *Mothers and King Baby* offers an impressive analysis of the issues surrounding the effort to reduce infant mortality rates for (white) Australian babies 1880-1950. Mein Smith traces the way in which the imperatives of Empire building came to be located around infant survival and motherhood. A principal character in any discussion of this conflation of baby survival and British imperialism was the New Zealand psychiatrist and iconoclast Truby King, and King's personality and foibles feature prominently in this text.

In her book Mein Smith provides an extraordinary wealth of detail on the complex social and political factors that influenced infant mortality trends in Australia over this seventy-year period. From the ideological issues which embraced British imperialism and eugenics, to the policy issues surrounding the application of various models of infant health services, the book provides an exhaustive state-by-state analysis. The overwhelming picture that emerges is the resistance and strength of mothers. Despite the power of experts and the demands of the state, Mein Smith's oral history data stress that mothers often did as their mothers did, bravely applying commonsense when responding to their baby's needs and resisting the regimentation of mothering. Unsurprisingly perhaps, despite the regiments of experts, it appears that mothers understood that babies are not all the same and therefore cannot be fed, held and rested to the one regime.

In line with European and North American research, the cause of high infant mortality rates turned out to be diarrhoeal disease not poor mothering. The public health issues that determined the ability or inability of towns and cities to provide uncontaminated milk, and the development of safe breast milk substitutes, are revealed to be the principle factors in reducing the infant mortality of white babies. Indeed, as is still the case for Aboriginal babies.

What is of most interest here is that the focus of the infant health movement, and the gaze of its experts, rested not on public health reform, but on the reform of mothers. The countless strategies that were employed in the various states and territories over that period—from milk depots to Lady Gowrie Centres—to improve mothering is one of the most fascinating elements of the book.

The comprehensiveness of the text, however, comes at the cost of its ability to follow and explore the themes it raises. Although it moves

us a long way in understanding how the problem of mothers and babies came to be conceptualised, the reader is still left wondering how the demarcation of the field occurred. What was the interrelationship between the data on infant mortality collected by the state and the development of professional expertise that attempted to remedy the problem? How was it that mothers and babies came to be the focus of nation building? How did the eugenic undertow to efforts to reduce infant mortality interact with programs to improve the mothering skills of working-class women?

A final difficulty with the work is that the mothers and their babies do not live in the book. Despite the case study and the oral histories, there is little reality about these women and their babies—dead or living. This is a disappointment as the topic lends itself to a far more vivid and immediate style of presentation.

But these misgivings are minor and should not detract from what is essentially a herculean effort of rigorous scholarship. Mein Smith has provided an invaluable text on the social history of infant mortality in Australia—one which I am sure is already forming the basis of further research that will continue the investigation of gender and nation building in this country.

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Not Just Weighing Babies, Plunket in Auckland, 1980-1998, Linda Bryder, (Pyramid Press, Auckland, 1998), 119.

This brief but detailed history of the Auckland branch of the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society, provides a local example of the larger enterprise described by Phillipa Mein Smith, in which the imperatives of nation building are conflated with the motherhood and the survival of infants. The history was commissioned by the Society and the principal sources are the records and archives it has preserved. As the author acknowledges, it is very much a local history, tracing the day-to-day work of the Society over a period of ninety years during which it has put into practice its motto, 'To help the Mothers and save the Babies'. It began in 1908 as a branch of the New Zealand-wide