Inspiration from the past (5)
Martha Mears, nature worshipper

In the final part of her series, **Anna Bosanquet** introduces a midwife who favoured nature over medical intervention

> *I have a great esteem for Plato – I have a great esteem for Socrates –*
> *But I have a still greater esteem and reverence for truth. (p 66)*

These are the words of Martha Mears, the last of our five midwives who are the only known female authors who published midwifery books in English before 1800. Mears self-published her book, *The Pupil of Nature; Or Candid Advice* to the Fair Sex, in London in 1797. It was sold at her home at 12 Red Lion Square and at some well-established London bookshops.

Mears' intended audience were her 'countrywomen' as well as fellow midwives. Describing herself first as a mother and only secondly as a "practitioner in midwifery of moderate experience" who has "spent some years under the most eminent professors of midwifery, and devoted a great part of her time to the perusal of the best treatises on the subject", she remains a "humble handmaid of nature" and a passionate opponent of the medicalisation of childbirth and unnecessary intervention. Her "fondest wish" is:

> *...to allay the fears of pregnant women, to inspire them with a just reliance on the powers of nature, and, above all, to guard them and their lovely children against the dangers of mismanagement, of rashness, of unfeeling and audacious quackery. (pp1-2).*

In the book's opening paragraph she calls:

> *FOLLOW NATURE – trace her footsteps – listen to her voice – mark well her conduct in all her works. She will teach you to do what is right and to avoid what is dangerous or improper... Resign yourself then with confidence to this unerring guide; and if at any time you should be tempted to forsake her, check the fatal impulse by instantly recollecting, that you are not more liable to lose your way even in the darkness of ignorance, than in the twilight of superficial knowledge – in pursuing the meteors of fancy, or the false glare of imposture and pretended science. (pp 1-2).*

Accepting male dominance

There is an interesting discord in Mears' writings. While her predecessors – especially Elizabeth Nihell (Bosanquet 2009a) and Margaret Stephen (Bosanquet 2009b) – courageously fought for midwifery to remain a female-only profession, Mears appears to be accepting the male dominance over the domain of childbirth. However, it is clear that she takes a definite stance in being pro-nature rather than interventionist in her approach – a well-documented battle fought at the time amongst the medical establishment itself (Shorter 2002). She admits to feeling proud and honoured to have read, and be familiar with, the contemporary works of the most prestigious male doctors at the time, and reassures her readers that her intention is not "to bring their doctrines and their practice into disrepute"; on the contrary, she recommends strongly that every midwife in the kingdom read their works. She "admires ... the ardour of their researches, the importance of their discoveries", and "the zeal and ability they have displayed in combating prejudice and error".

In his typically patronising tone, Aveling (1872: 130) – himself a doctor – comments on Mears' work: "There is no violent attack either against instruments or men midwives. The fight is evidently over, and, with the exception of a few outpost skirmishes, which will probably continue for some time yet, peace has been established." I leave it to the discretion of today's readers to judge for themselves whether even now, at the beginning of the 21st century, those "few outpost skirmishes" have genuinely died off.

Reverence for nature

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It must be acknowledged that Mears makes good use of the medical writings. Feeling strong by "being armed" with knowledge, she wants to use it to reach even further in her ambition to illustrate – and even worship – the wisdom of nature:

> *But much as I respect [male writers'] talents, they themselves have taught me to feel a still higher reverence for nature. They told me that we can grow wise only by her wisdom; and that we play the fool only when we disregard her precepts. I am sure they would join me in proclaiming to the world, that the instructions of man, opposed to hers, are but the faint glimmering of a taper compared with the radiance of the mid-day sun. (pp 3-4).*

One cannot help but wonder at the true meaning of this passage. Is this a premeditated effort at manipulation? Has Mears written this to have the doctors on her side, rather than to oppose her? Is she trying to express her views in a manner that would not alienate women readers, many of whom by that time had bought into the fashion of hiring men-midwives due to their supposed superiority in skill and knowledge?

Not an illness

Mears describes how, unjustly, "a state of pregnancy has too generally been considered as a state of indisposition or disease". She calls this attitude "a fatal error and the source of almost all the evils to which women in childbearing are liable". She continues by arguing that this leads to "the joy of becoming a mother" being

"chilled by imaginary terrors". How contemporary this feels! Mears elaborates further on the mechanism of awakening fear in an expecting mother:

> *A certain change at first is felt: some emotions of fear are then excited: these are increased by the fairy tales of old nurses – by the rules without number, and the medicines without necessity which interested men so often prescribe* (p 4).

There is an implicit criticism of the medical approach to childbearing in Mears' writings. She cautions even against offering too much advice, and warns that the negative state of mind is "more difficult to relieve than a physical symptom is to cure… Even where advice may seem proper, we should always be sparing of our cautions. The very means of safety awaken an idea of danger; and that idea is more to be dreaded, because harder to be removed than the worst of maladies" (p 4).

Poetry of pregnancy

Mears encourages women to admire the beauty of the female form, to feel confident in their bodies, and to trust their natural ability to become mothers. She calls to banish all "false alarms" about the dangers inherent in pregnancy and childbirth, by trying to convince "the timid female, that the very state, at which she has been taught to tremble, brings her nearer the perfection of her being; and, instead of disease, affords a much stronger presumption of health and security" (p 4).

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She follows with a beautiful and poetic description of many physiological changes that take place in the female body, first at puberty and later in pregnancy, which confirm how well nature prepares "her darling object, woman… for the great purpose of perpetuating the human species" (p 5). Mears argues that it would be extremely foolish to see all these wonderful changes – new "attractions" that a woman develops – as "the forerunners of pain and disease". She calls: "Away with such a silly, such an impious idea". Instead, "those changes… are happily designed as notices of their situation, not as symptoms of infirmity" (pp 5-6). In short, Mears argues that so-called "diseases of pregnancy" are in fact the very natural and much-needed "signs of conception". The female body is designed for procreation and this should be cherished; women should rejoice in their procreative powers.

Chaste approach

In contrast to Jane Sharp (Bosanquet 2009c) with her positive, bold and graphic descriptions of female anatomy and female sexuality, and Nihell and Stephen's concerns about inappropriate sexual encounters between male midwives and their patients, sex and sexual pleasures are non-existent in Mears' writings. And while providing lengthy and sophisticated chapters ►

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concerned with the anatomy and physiology of other organs – such as the stomach – Mears shies away from the anatomy of the female genital area, giving only rudimentary remarks on the subject. She considers detailed descriptions of that part of the female body "useless and indelicate"; they could "offend the chaste eye" and "light up a blush on the cheek of modesty".

Supporting women in labour

Like her predecessors, Mears was opposed to hastening the labour and the birth of the placenta. She warns against early, directive pushing:

> *The doctrine of patients helping themselves... by urging with all the voluntary force they are able to exert beyond the dictates of nature; as if a labour was a trick to be learned, and not a regular process of the constitution (p124).*

As with earlier female writers, she stresses the importance of psychological factors in labour. Midwives may find some of Mears' advice to women relevant and helpful even today. For example, she recommends that:

> *Women should be informed, that the best state of mind they can be in at the time of labour, is that of submission to the necessities of their situation; that those who are most patient actually suffer the least; that, if they are resigned to their pains, it is impossible for them to do wrong; and that attention is far more frequently required to prevent hurry than to forward a labour. In every thing which relates to the act of parturition, nature, not disturbed by disease, and unmolested by interruption, is fully competent to accomplish her own purpose: she may be truly said to disdain and abhor assistance. Instead, therefore, of despairing, and thinking they are abandoned in the hour of their distress, all women should believe, and find comfort in the reflection, that they are at those times under the peculiar care of Providence (pp 124-5).*

Conclusion

Mears' book is similar to that by Sharp in that it is written for women as well as midwives. A holistic approach to midwifery is adopted, with an emphasis on lifestyle, health beliefs and behaviours, and the psychological status of women, while frequent references are made to other academic works. It differs in its approach from the work of Sarah Stone (Bosanquet 2009d), who impresses by her pragmatic, problem-solving style, professional integrity and exemplary discipline and work ethic. It also differs from the books by Nihell and Stephen in that it is neither explicitly concerned with anti-obstetric attack, midwifery education, nor the doctor-midwife-woman triad dynamic. Mears' poetic, florid, feminine writing style appears to be at odds with the practical, strong, definite, professional style of her predecessors. The passion, conviction and woman-centeredness are still there, but hidden under the mask of female appropriateness and modesty – the newly emerging values in England in that era.

Our five midwives lived through a period from the late 17th century to the very beginnings of the 19th century – a time of enormous progress and social, economic and political change. London – where they all worked and published – became a magnet for enterprising people from all over the world. There was great improvement in diet and living conditions, and the population of the city rose from 300,000 to 1 million (Plumb 1950). The improvement had a positive effect on maternal and infant mortality. Unfortunately, this was followed by a disappointing regression in the 19th century, resulting from the ill-effects on health caused by the industrial revolution.

In this series of articles we have witnessed how extended skills, respect and status of female midwives were slowly being lost to the medical profession. Despite their undeniable dedication, knowledge and experience, the independent thinkers and practitioners of the past became the mere shadows and handmaidens of the medical establishment. A long-flourishing tradition was denigrated and destroyed. The female craft was driven out by the male profession. It is in the hands of midwives of today to restore the sense of development, achievement and pride which is so striking in the writings of their early modern predecessors. **TPM**

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