

Melanie Reynolds, *Infant Mortality and Working-Class Child Care, 1850-1899*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. £63.00, 978 1 137 36903 1(hardback), pp. IX + 251.

Irresponsible, uncaring and ignorant working-class women were responsible for the high rate of infant mortality in the north of England during the second half of the nineteenth century. This is the long-standing perception that Melanie Reynolds challenges in *Infant Mortality and Working-Class Child Care, 1850-1899*. In a retelling of working-class women's history 'where mothers fought and won battles to enhance, rather than diminish, their offspring's chances of survival' (p.2), Reynolds systematically and convincingly debunks the widely held belief that women in the urban and industrial north neither cared for, nor were concerned about the welfare of their infants.

Using a variety of sources, from Parliamentary papers, factory inspection reports, newspapers, census records and the small number of collections detailing the experiences of working-class women's lives, Reynolds demonstrates that mothers and those employed to care for children strived to maintain infant's health and wellbeing. Each chapter of the book focuses on a different aspect of child care for working-class infants. In the first two chapters, Reynolds demonstrates that while working-class, waged mothers may have challenged middle-class sensibilities of motherhood and domesticity, they did not place employment above their children, as contemporary commenters have suggested. Instead of separating themselves from their child, working women exercised their "rights" to take their nursing infants with them to work. Such practice occurred in agriculture, metal and salt work, and in factories. Within the confines of the textile factory, Reynold's argues that it was not uncommon to see a basket lying at the feet of a working mother. Such close proximity allowed a woman to feed her child throughout the day, thus reducing the infant mortality rate as a child consumed breastmilk, rather than substances known to cause diarrheal sickness, which often proved to be fatal. Furthermore, women actively took steps to ensure their place of employment offered the safest and most hygienic environment for their child. This behaviour was, Reynolds argues, supported by factory owners and overseers, who knew that if the needs of working mothers were not met, then these valuable employees would go elsewhere. Such an argument provides further critique to the perception that working-class women simply accepted the changing nature of employment brought by the industrial revolution. The second half of the books offers a similar critique of the negative perceptions of workhouse nurses and women employed as day-carers and baby-minders. Reynold's concludes that the views of Victorian, middle-class commenters, and numerous contemporary historians is incorrect – high infant mortality rates were not due to the failings of working-class women. Instead, the 'well-meaning but misguided medical establishment and penny-pinched factory owners' (p.162-3) should appropriate the blame.

The appeal of this monograph lies in its intelligent analysis and compelling arguments. Through detailed examination of records, Reynolds demonstrates how contemporary perceptions of working-class Victorian women in the industrial north have been shaped by the prevailing adherence to the ideal of the "angel in the house". The view that working-class women chose waged work over family fails to consider the reality that employment assisted the family economy and so helped secure the survival of infants. Furthermore, Reynolds demonstrates how the lingering perception that a working mother is a bad mother has seeped into many of the historical narratives of the lives of nineteenth century women. Working mothers did successfully combine paid employment with child care. High rates of infant mortality occurred in spite of attempts by mothers and those employed to care for infants, rather than as a result of the actions of these women. Reynold's study is a poignant reminder that our understanding of the past is shaped by our contemporary beliefs. In demonstrating this, the experiences of norther, industrial and urban working mothers are reclaimed.

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