

Book Reviews

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG, *Fasting girls: the emergence of anorexia nervosa as a modern disease*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. 366, illus., £19.95, \$25.00.

Anorexia nervosa has attracted enormous attention over the past 20 years—a level of attention that is arguably out of all proportion to its importance, at least in quantitative terms. It is still a relatively uncommon condition, though its consequences can be very severe (one authoritative source puts the mortality rate at 15 to 21 per cent of cases). The interest in anorexia nervosa is undoubtedly linked to its class, age and above all its gender specificity—for although male cases are identified, the ratio of female to male patients is said to be in the order of 20 to one. The fact that anorexic patients are typically, though not exclusively, young, middle- or upper-class, intelligent women constitutes an ideal combination for ensuring clinical and academic attention. Parental anxiety and demand for action and the professional interest of clinicians coincide with the fascination of feminist writers, who see the condition almost as a barometer of women's position in present-day society. Yet, for all the numerous studies of anorexia nervosa that have been published over recent years, there has been relatively little historical study of the condition. Most book-length studies make some reference to Sir William Gull's introduction of the term "anorexia nervosa" in a paper published in 1873 and to Charles Lasègue's contemporaneous discussion of the illness, but, apart from some reference to Freudian claims that the disease is motivated by a denial of sexuality, there is little interest in ideas and practice prior to the 1970s.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg's history of the disease is, therefore, welcome. Significantly, however, this is a history constructed even more strongly than usual with the present in mind, whose stated objective is to account for the current prominence of the disease. One consequence is that, after a brief introduction, the book begins, a little surprisingly, with a detailed discussion of anorexia nervosa in the 1980s. However, this lengthy chapter clearly sets out the author's understanding of the condition, which she sees as a product of biological, psychological, and cultural factors, with culture determining the mode of expression of the individual's psychological problems. Her own concern, because of the historical nature of her study, is with matters of culture, not biology or psychology, a bias that reflects and is informed by much recent feminist writing on anorexia.

Once she turns to her historical task, Brumberg is faced with the problem of determining how far and in what directions the history of anorexia nervosa should be traced, given the relatively late introduction of the concept and her definite, and surely correct, view that earlier cases of fasting cannot properly be identified as cases of anorexia nervosa. There is no simple equivalence between earlier fasting behaviours, which had very different significances, and anorexia nervosa, as some have assumed. Brumberg nonetheless sets the boundaries of her study quite broadly, drawing links between earlier fasting behaviours and anorexia nervosa and portraying it as a history "of those who have used control of appetite, food and the body as a focus of symbolic language" (p. 2). A key word here is control and, following present-day understandings, Brumberg's terrain is not loss of appetite, the literal meaning of the term anorexia, but motivated control of eating.

Brumberg argues that, historically, fasting has been a largely female activity and she begins her history with medieval *anorexia mirabilis*, the miraculously-inspired fasting in women and girls, such as Catherine of Siena (1347–80) in the medieval period, seeing this fasting as part of female religious asceticism and not as any sign of pathology. This tradition of religious fasting did not entirely disappear in the next two or three centuries, and Brumberg describes a number of cases of prolonged abstinence in the seventeenth century—"miraculous maids", who tended to be young and of humble origin. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century these miraculous maids were replaced by the "fasting girls" that give the book their title—a term used "to describe cases of prolonged abstinence, where there was uncertainty and ambiguity about the etiology of the fast and ambiguity about the intention of the faster" (p. 61).

The next five chapters, which concentrate on the final three decades of the nineteenth century, constitute the core of Brumberg's study. The first examines the debate about fasting girls during these decades, describing the conflict between religious and medical interpretations

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and paying particular attention to the accounts of neurologists—a crucial group in the emerging profession of psychiatry. The second, provides both an examination of medical interest in appetite loss of all forms and a detailed consideration of Gull's work. This is followed by a discussion of Lasègue's theorizing and of the linkage between anorexia nervosa and family relationships, that draws on contemporary cultural ideas: anorexia is seen as “a striking dysfunction of the bourgeois family system” (p. 134).

The next chapter describes nineteenth-century treatments of anorexia nervosa. Brumberg points to the tension between the medical belief that removal from the family environment was necessary and the hostility to the mental asylum as a location for the treatment of young middle and upper class women—a tension that led to range of *ad hoc* solutions including travel, visits to relatives, as well as stays in private “hysterical homes”, cottage hospitals and water-cure establishments. She also examines the medical focus on weight increase, still a clinical concern today. The final chapter of this group examines the culture of medical examination and then the meanings surrounding eating and appetite in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Two more chapters deal with anorexia nervosa in the twentieth century. One focuses on treatments, including physical and psychological interventions. The other looks at dieting and eating, the revolution in terms of how and what we eat this century, and the culture of thinness for girls and young women that has developed since the Second World War. This culture, and the strong normative pressures with which it is associated, increases the numbers at risk for anorexia nervosa.

Brumberg's discussion of Gull's and Lasègue's ideas, her description of individual cases of fasting girls and her examinations of the meanings of food, eating, fasting, and dieting are informative and thoughtful. Yet she does not circumvent entirely satisfactorily the dangers of abstraction and decontextualization that any author faces in writing the history of a single disease. On the one hand, she succumbs to the temptation to spend rather too high a proportion of her text on individual cases—illuminating though many of them are—so that there is rather too little space for discussion of how they fit in with and relate to a broader pattern of contemporary social relationship and ideas. On the other hand, her theoretical bias towards the key importance of culture in the understanding of anorexia leads her largely to ignore the broader structural changes in society—issues such as the relation between social classes and the pursuit of professional power and interests. Surprisingly, for example, she makes little reference to the important and influential corpus of work on the history of medicine and psychiatry that has appeared over the past two decades, apart from mentioning some of the feminist studies.

Brumberg has, therefore, done some useful groundwork in her historical study of anorexia nervosa and has produced an interesting book; a more definitive history remains to be written.

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HILARY MARLAND, *Medicine and society in Wakefield and Huddersfield 1780–1870*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. xxiii, 530, £40.00

The rather straightforward title of this substantial volume does not fully encapsulate its range of analysis. Instead of the traditional concentration on leading medical figures and the administration of the major medical institutions, this study, derived from a Ph.D. thesis, examines not only the voluntary hospital and dispensary provision and Poor Law facilities, but also friendly society provision for the sick and, most interestingly, non-regular “fringe” practice in these two West Riding communities. The linking of the various forms of medical provision with the economic and social development of the two towns is almost unique in recent studies, a notable exception being Pickstone's volume on the Manchester region.

Wakefield remained essentially a marketing town based on corn, malt and wool, whereas Huddersfield developed strongly in textiles, both from small-scale entrepreneurs and merchant-manufacturers. Wakefield started first in establishing charitable organizations, but