

BOOK REVIEW

British Women Surgeons and their Patients, 1860–1918 *by Claire Brock*

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How British women doctors became surgeons, what sort of surgery they undertook, and how they were viewed both by their male colleagues and by their patients are the main themes of the latest book by Claire Brock, which covers the first sixty or so years of women in medicine in Britain.

The author's principal sources are the archives of the New Hospital for Women (NHW), the Royal Free Hospital (RFH) and the Scottish Women's Hospitals (SWH), all of them huge archives, and it is impossible to do full justice to her extensive research in a short review.

Brock's first chapter is a great start, outlining the progress of – and the controversies surrounding – women learning surgery on the job at the NHW. From the gynaecological case notes of female surgeons at the RFH between 1903 and 1913, succeeding chapters provide new insights into the responses of their patients to hospitalisation and treatment, and the women surgeons' approach to malignant disease.

There follows a fascinating account of SWH doctors operating on casualties in France, and a few paragraphs about the immediate postwar years. On the home front, Brock documents changes to undergraduate and postgraduate training after 1914 and the wartime career and caseload of the distinguished RFH surgeon Louisa Aldrich-Blake.

Two quibbles: first, that possibly too much space has been devoted to clinical details, which slightly unbalances the book, and second, that Brock does not discuss in any depth the career trajectories of women in surgery after 1918. By concentrating primarily on the surgeons of the NHW, RFH and SWH she has produced a huge amount of new information, but in some ways her complex picture is frustratingly limited because interesting and relevant information from outside her focus has had to be omitted. Perhaps she should have aimed to produce a longer work?

That said, I admit that these criticisms spring entirely from my desire to know more for Brock has succeeded in answering fully all the questions she set herself. In doing so, she has produced a meticulously researched monograph which will be of great value both to historians of medicine and those working in the field of women's history.

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