

Lesley Potter on Colonial Midwives of Sydney, 1788-1901



Detail from the cover of *Mistress of her Profession, Colonial Midwives of Sydney 1788-1901*

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Lesley Potter's *Mistress of Her Profession* opens with the gripping case study of midwife Sarah Ann Hopkins, who immigrated to NSW with her family in 1848. Few midwives had formal credentials at the time, but Hopkins held a midwifery diploma by direct instruction from the Westminster Lying-in Hospital in London.

On Hopkins's voyage to Australia aboard the *Steadfast* she was appointed to the voluntary position of matron, working under surgeon superintendent John Read. Their team consisted of two assistant matrons and a male nurse attendant. Potter says the records reveal "the stress, anxieties, strenuous nursing and midwifery care" that confronted them.

Shipboard conditions dictated the response of those responsible for the health and wellbeing of the passengers. The on-board conditions for confinement were generally inadequate. Some women were confined in their berths, which in steerage was extremely limited, with little if any privacy. Some women were moved into the ship's hospital. All women contended with restricted space, lack of hygiene and limited ventilation, plus the pitching and rolling of the ship.

There were 16 deaths, 14 of them infants, and seven births during the five-month journey. All the confinements took place during the final hot months when "high temperatures would have increased both the discomfort for women in labour as well as the risk of dehydration for the children". Throughout this, Hopkins was pregnant herself. She was safely delivered of her child on February 22, 1849. On March 18, Read noted that she was back at work.

Potter's examination of the issues for midwives in Australia throughout the 19th century is comprehensive. Chapters describe the broader context to midwifery work, details of the

maternity care offered at the Female Factory, Parramatta, and the beginnings of maternity care in Sydney.

She deals with midwifery as a business, the colonial law and midwives who gave evidence at inquests. And she does not neglect what she calls “the dark side of midwifery practice”, when their skills were applied to termination of pregnancies rather than delivery.

In 1877 the Benevolent Society was first to establish a formal training course for midwives in Sydney. In the early decades of the 20th century, Australian states, one by one, passed legislation that required midwives to be registered.

Each chapter is illustrated by a case study, all of which I found as absorbing as that of Hopkins's. They include groundbreaking information about Aboriginal midwives, who can be even harder to find than the European version.

Potter's first example is a remarkable 1788 description of an Aboriginal birth, apparently recounted to First Fleet judge advocate David Collins. With the consent of the mother, whose name was War-re-weer, Aboriginal women had paid some (unnamed) European women the compliment of inviting them to attend the birth.

As one of them told Collins, she watched as the three Aboriginal midwives “poured cold water over the abdomen of the labouring woman, War-re-weer. Another performed the curious practice of tying a cord around War-re-weer's neck and with the other end of the cord rubbing her own lips until they bled.” Potter understands this to be “the transference of War-re-weer's labour pain, associated with uterine contractions, from her body”.

One of the white women was privileged to cut the umbilical cord. She and the other European women would have failed to comprehend the sacredness of country and of rituals associated with the birth, but the only recorded tension arising from a gap in culture and language was the white women's insistence on washing the baby, over protests from the indigenous women.

There were fewer barriers to understanding in the midwifery practice of Gur-ring-gai woman Bidy Lewis. Married to an ex-convict European named John Lewis, she lived on their farm near the Hawkesbury River in the 1830s and acted as midwife to their extended family and their neighbours. Their daughter Catherine Benn continued the family tradition as a midwife. Throughout the area, she was well known for her midwifery services and as the “Queen of Scotland Island”.

May Yarrowick is the earliest identified indigenous woman to register with the Australasian Trained Nurses Association. She gained her midwifery certificate in 1907 after training at the Women's Hospital, Sydney.

Potter has done a fine job uncovering the colonial story of a largely female profession that by its nature tends to remain hidden.

Her 40-year career as a nurse and midwife with, as she puts it, “eclectic academic qualifications” — in theology, masters in English literature and doctorate in history — means a deep understanding of her subject combines with intensive scholarship to produce a fascinating, valuable work that is securely grounded on evidence. Definitely worth reading.

*Babette Smith specialises in colonial history. Her latest book is *The Luck of the Irish*.*

Mistress of Her Profession: Colonial Midwives of Sydney 1788-1901

By Lesley Potter,

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