

A Voice for Mothers. The Plunket Society and Infant Welfare 1907–2000. By Linda Bryder. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003. 352 pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN1 8-6940-290-1.

AS NEW ZEALAND'S BEST-KNOWN VOLUNTARY ORGANISATION, the Plunket Society touched the lives of most Pakeha New Zealanders born since World War II. This is the second, longest and most scholarly history of the national body (though Philippa Mein Smith has also ably charted the Society's fortunes in the Australian context). Unlike most voluntary societies, Plunket's story has historiographical depth and contested positions. It has appeared in school texts and sparked numerous undergraduate essays as well as theses in history, nursing, sociology and public health — more than 20 in Bryder's bibliography specifically refer to Plunket or its Karitane hospitals. Erik Olssen's 1979 *NZ Listener* essays on Plunket and his 1981 article in this journal provided the best-known critiques of Plunket from a feminist perspective. Bryder's book is part of a more recent trend to modify this notion of Truby King and his Plunket acolytes 'imposing' rigid child-rearing doctrines upon generations of anxious mothers.

However, *A Voice for Mothers* also provides a window onto a number of other important themes in New Zealand's medical and welfare history — most especially the operations of the 'mixed economy of welfare', and the development of paediatrics, alongside changing trends and issues in infant welfare. Although Bryder emphasizes that the book 'is not an institutional history of Plunket', it provides a life-cycle view of a still-viable organization, but one whose fortunes diminished in the changing socio-political climate of the late twentieth century.

Bryder's research establishes Plunket as New Zealand's foremost voluntary welfare organization over most of the twentieth century, its primacy based upon the undisputed worthiness of infant welfare as a cause, the effectiveness of its top-level leadership and broad-based membership, and its successful capture of politicians — and their wives. If anything reinforces the small scale of New Zealand society and the accessibility of its political leaders, it is the history of Plunket. The *Dominion* editorialized in the 1930s that the popular resort of any cash-strapped organization in New Zealand was the 'foraging expedition' to Wellington.¹ Even before it was incorporated in 1907 Plunket managed to get a pledge of government subsidies and outsiders remarked upon the moral as well as financial support behind this 'unification of State and voluntary effort' (p.31). Its office-holders frequently included cabinet ministers' wives and it is remarkable how often its early deputations to Wellington included the spouse of the politician targeted (an interesting extension of pillow talk). In comparison with developments in other countries, Bryder maintains, the voluntary workers of the Plunket Society kept firm control over central and local decision-making despite government funding. The history of the voluntary sector in New Zealand is characterized by the alacrity with which organizations sought government subsidies and other forms of support and by the emergence of so-called 'monopoly providers' dominating an area of service provision with government backing. Plunket was the pre-eminent example of this, but the interesting aspect of the relationship is that it occurred despite a less-than-supportive Health Department, whose key officials resented Plunket's independence. Plunket's undisputed ascendancy was weakened in the 1970s by critiques of its 'old-fashioned' promotion of routines and its 'monoculturalism'. It ended with the competitive ethos, health reforms and contract culture of the 1990s. Although it was probably not Bryder's main intention, this book provides valuable insights into the workings of democracy and pressure group politics in New Zealand.

The key thrust of *A Voice for Mothers* is contained in the title. Bryder makes a strong case for Plunket as a 'maternalist' organization grounded in the notion of sexual difference. Internationally, the term has been applied to women's groups that promoted the interests of women and children and in the process developed parallel power structures to the political and commercial spheres dominated by men. Although Plunket was founded by a man, Frederic Truby King, it gained the active support of talented, sometimes wealthy and educated women, who invested time, energy and resources into the work. Bryder argues that women made the decisions in branches, resisted Health Department control, and used their social networks in support of the Society. King is presented as 'a useful ally to the women who ran Plunket' (p.40), an ally who was shed once his deteriorating mental state made him an embarrassment to the cause. King and Plunket were not the same, she argues — once the Society was established, real power lay with the women on its Central Council who did not defer to male health professionals. Here again, a shift occurred in the late 1980s. As in many voluntary organizations, the president and her executive lost power to new appointees with managerial skills, a number of them men. The historically effective 'cocktail of influential women volunteers and medical experts' was no longer seen to be appropriate. The pool of capable women available to take on leadership roles was also reduced by the movement of paid women into the workforce and the alternative opportunities for influence that opened up at the end of the twentieth century.

Bryder's history provides a 'voice', not only for mothers, but for Plunket's ground-level workers, the Plunket nurses. Relationships between mothers and Plunket nurses were a critical element in Plunket's reception, and Bryder confirms, not surprisingly, that much depended on the nurses' personalities and flexibility in interpreting the Plunket regime. The picture drawn includes nurses who walked for miles in new suburbs to visit new mothers and babies, who dipped into their own pockets to help hard-up families, who took babies home to give stressed mothers a break, who helped with older children's correspondence lessons during Plunket visits, and who braved dog bites and vandalism in visits to low socio-economic areas. As others have also pointed out, the interface between mothers and nurses involved negotiation and accommodation, as well as an element of resistance to Plunket's teachings.

A Voice for Mothers moves between matters of high policy and the day-to-day experience of Plunket mothers and nurses. It touches base with a whole range of changing social concerns affecting the family, and reminds us of the changing foundation to 'scientific' dictates on human well-being. It contains wonderful photographic images of the Society's work, informatively and intelligently captioned. It provides a sympathetic view of Plunket's activities, without becoming an apologist for it. For this former Plunket baby, at least, it confirms that my own academic critique from the 1970s needs to be balanced by personal memories of visits to a buxom and benign Plunket nurse with my baby brother, of how supported my mother felt after such visits, and 'Plunkie's' relaxed assurance that it was fine for me to run free outside in bare feet as often as I wanted.

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THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS is based on papers presented at the 'Communities of Women' conference held at the University of Otago in July 2000 to celebrate the hugely important career of Dorothy Page. The result is a diverse and innovative collection, with