BIRTHING THE NATION
Birthing the Nation

Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons

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For Bill, Thomas, and Nicholas
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Preface

Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons explores what relationships existed between corporate and individual identities in the British Isles from the 1660s to the 1830s by examining the emergence of men, rather than midwives, as pre-eminent authorities over sex and birth.

This book responds to two central topics of interest to late twentieth-century historians: the development of nationalism and the formation of modern ideas about gender and identity. One flank of scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, exemplified by Gerald Newman and Linda Colley, has argued that individuals developed patriotic and passionate senses of national affiliation during the British eighteenth century. Another school, including Thomas Laqueur, Leonore Davidoff, and Catherine Hall, has located the British eighteenth century as the pivotal place where modern views of women and men as ‘incommensurable opposites’ first emerged. What has remained relatively unexplored is how these two modern categories—national identification and fundamental, oppositional sexual difference—emerged in eighteenth-century Britain not as merely coincident processes, but as developments that were constituent of each other.

Birthing the Nation takes on the interrelationship between corporate and individual identities, via reproduction, but it did not originate in this problem. This project began life as a very different doctoral dissertation in the early 1990s that focused broadly on ‘reproduction’ and those specialists who were interested in birth and midwifery in eighteenth-century England. It had little to say about either national affiliations or, actually, sex and gender, and it did not question why men replaced women as midwives among elite Georgians. As I first wrote, and then revised the dissertation, and finally abandoned it to start again in search of an explanation for why female midwives declined in status and authority, I was impressed by how often sources outside medicine and science talked about sex and birth. Newspapers, journals, satirical cartoons, plays, poems, ethnological and linguistic texts, criminal court records, and more were rich with reproductive incidents, especially bizarre, dangerous, strange, and wondrous stories. The episodes that I uncovered from the time I began researching my dissertation, including the story of a woman who claimed she gave birth to seventeen rabbits, cartoons of pregnant men, the search for microscopic humans in either sperm or ova, a Welsh linguist’s comparisons between the alphabet and the genitals, and other unexpected cases, seemed as
fascinating and even puzzling to contemporaries as they were to me. Yet more surprising than the strangeness of the stories themselves was how these many dramatic reproductive episodes unleashed broad anxieties and enthusiasms, from the hatred of Catholics and the French to the dangers of women’s imaginations. In fact, as I read these curious, but illuminating stories (and discovered many more than I could use for the book), it was impossible to escape how often sexual and reproductive matters were bound up in the most vital problems of not only gender, sex, and the family, but also political party, religious identity, ethnic differences, and the distinctions between nations. By acknowledging this, the book’s central narrative problem—how men replaced midwives as the pre-eminent authorities over sex and reproduction—unexpectedly came to illuminate how the British conceived of themselves and others as individuals and as members of groups.

The strange stories that I found about the ascent of men-midwives, combined with developments generally overlooked by other historians, such as the founding of maternity hospitals and legislation about abortion and out-of-wedlock motherhood, raised important questions about sex, birth, and gender for contemporaries. Could women give birth to non-human creatures? Why do men not give birth? Where and how does life begin? How can society control the reproductive practices of individuals? Were women and men fundamentally different from each other? Could men transcend their own bodies to sympathize with the pains of women? What were the social and political consequences of severing the traditional boundaries between the sexes through the rise of man-midwifery? These were far-ranging issues, even if some of them now strike us as prima facie silly. When Britons explored these topics—sometimes satirically, because even though some early Georgians maintained that women could produce rabbits, hardly anyone really believed, for example, that men could give birth—they also constructed a body of natural and modern facts about sex, gender, reproduction, and the family. These natural truths in turn lent themselves to the making of political and cultural claims about phenomena not directly related to birth or midwifery. For instance, commentators used strange and ridiculous reproductive stories that occurred within marginal ethnic communities, the working class, outré political camps, homosexuals, and France to represent, via the inversion of the transcendent laws of nature, the inherent absurdity of the other.

*Birthing the Nation* moves chronologically and episodically, with each chapter analysing both a particular aspect of how male science conquered the sexual-reproductive body (or not) and an interrelated development in the history of British identities. As a result, some of the targets move from chapter to chapter and period to period, and I do not claim that certain themes discussed in any depth in only one chapter—political party or homosexual identity, for
instance—were vital to the British only at the one juncture examined in the book. To analyse every category of identity that emerges in this book across nearly two hundred years would simply be too unwieldy. Instead, I have sought to emphasize the many types of identity that sex and birth illuminated to make a broader argument about the power of the reproductive body to naturalize a range of social, cultural, and political claims. The narrative introduces certain identities—homosexuality, race, the working class, political parties—when they dominated texts related to particular reproductive issues, but other categories, particularly gender, religion, and nationalism, intruded on nearly every contemporary reproductive drama I examine here, and thus are highlighted throughout to help thread chapters together. Gathered together as a whole, the episodes explored in this book illuminate how male science continually altered the meanings of sex and birth in ways that helped the British imagine specific aspects of individual and social identities at home and abroad.

The parameters of this book are framed by the fundamental and dramatic changes of the long eighteenth century in the British Isles and the British Empire. Many of the stories I tell here occurred in England, especially London, which was by far the Empire’s largest city, boasting some 500,000 people in 1700 and nearly one million in 1800. This vast city served as the centre of political and economic life for the one in seven eighteenth-century English people who lived in the capital at some point in their lives. Many of the central actors in this book came from and spent time in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, other continental countries, and parts of the British Empire, but I have read them as helping to construct an imagined British community that largely served English interests. They had much to say about other people from the French to the primitive, from the American colonists to the Scots, and while this book would become too vast by discussing the emergent sense of identity and nationalism among these other peoples, it is vital to recall that the subjects of their commentaries constructed alternative, and sometimes resistant, views of themselves.

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L. F. C.
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