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Exploring The History of Birth Trauma and Obstetric Violence in British Medicine, 1690–1890

This paper discusses the author’s new research project exploring the historical origins of obstetric harm and violence in British medicine. In recent years, “obstetric violence” – a term coined by feminist activists in Latin America to describe gendered violence experienced during childbirth – has become an urgent issue worldwide for activists, researchers, legislators and medical professionals. This talk contributes to these discussions by adding a new dimension: an historical investigation into the origins of what we now understand to be obstetric violence. I outline how concerns about harm, violation and violence emerged in British medicine and culture, from the emergence of men practising midwifery in the 1690s, to the creation of the British Obstetrical and Gynaecology Societies in the late 1890s. Drawing on historical studies of gendered violence, and British medicine, the project analyses medical and cultural data to illuminate unexplored connections between obstetrics, gender, violence and emotions. Did British laypeople understand childbirth to be inherently harmful, and did the rise of obstetrics change this? What role did emotions –like fear– ,and gender, play in British laypeople and surgeons’ responses to new surgical practices? Exploring these questions provides necessary historical context for contemporary concerns about obstetric violence, and lays important groundwork for history, sociology and health research.