

Book reviews

Abortion in a changing world. Edited by ROBERT E. HALL, M.D. New York and London. Columbia University Press. 1970. Pp. xx+377. Price £4 10s. (£4.50p).

This book contains the proceedings of the first part of an international conference convened by the Association for the Study of Abortion at Hot Springs, Virginia, in November 1968. The areas covered are those concerning the ethical, medical, legal, social and global aspects of the subject, and a second volume will provide a report of ten panel sessions which dealt with abortion and animation, poverty, public health, psychiatry, obstetrics, mortality, constitutionality, progeny and woman-kind.

The editor admits that it has been necessary to compress all the formal papers rather severely and it would seem likely that this policy has also been applied to the reports on the discussions relating to the papers in each section. It is claimed that no attempt was made to write to equal numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics, men and women, whites and blacks, or foreigners and Americans, and the main consideration in selection was expertise in the field of abortion.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise to find that the great majority of speakers showed a strong leaning in favour of legalized abortion and the view of the traditional Catholic is something of a lone voice.

What does come as more of a surprise, if the evidence and statistics are to be believed, is the extent to which abortion under most adverse conditions, has been accepted by women (and men) throughout the world as a means of birth control and preferable to continuing with pregnancy. This in itself suggests, and our more limited experience in this country tends to support the view, that abortion is not liable to be followed by psychiatric illness. A psychiatrist, Dr Kummer, in Part II of the book concludes—"that abortion, far from being a precipitator of psychiatric illness, quite to the contrary is actually a defence against such an occurrence in women who are susceptible to mental illness".

Much time and space is taken up considering questions such as—"when do the products of human conception become human?" and "at what stage in the pregnancy does ensoulment occur?" Several speakers obviously saw in these points a possible chink in the Catholic armour of resistance to what others regard as progress.

Parts IV and V dealing with the social and global aspects of abortion respectively are of special interest and provide ample evidence of the

fact that birth control has failed to prevent the problem of the unwanted pregnancy.

Too little has been known of the extent to which illegal abortion is widespread and practised unofficially, not only in countries which are traditionally regarded as undeveloped, but also in those which are comparatively civilized. One would not expect statistics on a subject such as this to be either plentiful or reliable and most of the contributors felt obliged to make this point. Nevertheless, one could hardly fail to be impressed with the theme of speaker after speaker as to the distress caused universally by excess fertility and only now coming to be accepted as worthy of attention. There is evidence of a decline in criminal abortion in countries which have adopted a more liberal code of practice with a consequent fall in death and morbidity association with abortion, though the number of legal terminations which have to be performed to achieve these improvements is rather frightening.

The book gives an authoritative, forward looking report on the position of abortion in the world today and will be studied and referred to by many, not only in the medical profession, who have more than a passing interest in a subject which will, one suspects, be a great deal in the public eye in the years ahead.

Gorbals doctor. GEORGE GLADSTONE ROBERTSON, M.D. Jarrolds. London. 1970. Pp. 189. Price 35s. (£1.75)

The Gorbals district of Glasgow has for long held an unsavoury place in the history of the slums. Its saga was sung some 30 years ago in a novel entitled *No mean city*, a lurid yet touching tale based on truth and vouched for as such by at least one of the denizens of that area. Dr Robertson has worked all his professional life in this district, and has found time to study his patients 'in depth'—to use a fashionable cliché. Without leaving his practice he was able to acquire the MD of Glasgow University and to carry out original studies on vomiting in pregnancy and other conditions probably connected with stress.

In this book of reminiscences, in the authorship of which he has been helped by Roderick Grant, he recounts his experiences and theories. His parents were missionaries in China and he was born in Shanghai. To pass through his medical training he was obliged to assist his uncle as dispenser and clinical clerk; yet he obtained sufficient proficiency in swimming to be chosen to represent his country at the Olympic Games in Antwerp.

It is a pleasure to read a book by a general