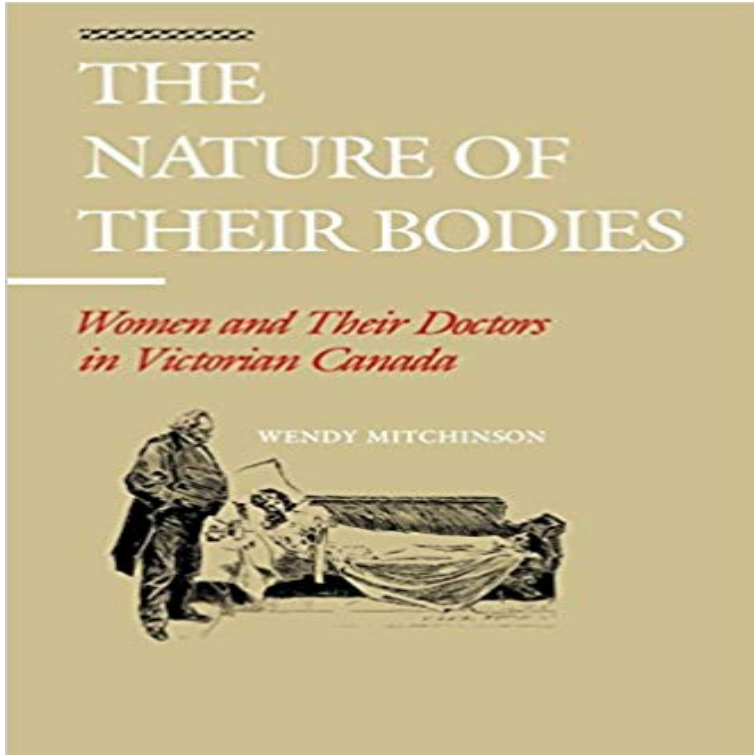


The Nature of their Bodies: Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada



In 1864 a woman was admitted to the Toronto asylum and diagnosed as suffering from mania, a not uncommon diagnosis for women, a step beyond hysteria. The cause cited by doctors for the patients insanity was lactation. This was one of the scores of cases cited by Wendy Mitchinson in her history of the medical treatment of women in Victorian Canada. The cases, combined with the medical literature of the period, reflect the societys preoccupations, both among the general population and the medical profession. Above all, they illustrate in sharp detail the societys perception of women. For most medical practitioners, the male body was taken to be the norm; women were other. Doctors were uncomfortable with some of the central physiological experiences of women, such as menstruation and menopause. They often felt that healthy bodies should not undergo such stresses. From this attitude it was a short leap to viewing the normal functions of womens bodies as illnesses to be treated by specialists. One of the most significant medical developments of this period was the rise of gynaecology and medical obstetrics as major medical specialties. Practitioners used surgical gynaecology to alleviate disorders mental as well as physical in women. In documenting the changing nature of interventional medicine, Mitchinson considers the medical treatment of women within the context of what was available to physicians at the time. She also explores the kind of pressure that women themselves brought to bear. Faced with a medical profession that viewed them as creatures of weakness, women used their strength and stamina to change attitudes and treatments.

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