

## Registration of Midwives.

AT the afternoon Session of the National Union of Women Workers on Thursday, October 29th, a paper was read by Miss Rosalind Paget, Hon. Treasurer of the Midwives Institute, on "The Registration of Midwives," followed by one written by Miss Katharine Twining, of the Plaistow District Nurses' Home. Both papers were excellent from the point of view of those who are in favour of the Registration of Midwives as independent practitioners, and who consider that a three months' study of Midwifery and examination, by women taken mostly from the uneducated classes, is "proper training" to fit them for the extremely responsible duty of attending without supervision upon lying-in women. From the point of view of those who are in opposition to Registration as thus defined, and who are anxious that if the law is evoked it shall make it possible for poor lying-in women to command the services of efficient medical practitioners, or of efficient Nurse Midwives (thoroughly trained Nurses possessing a thorough and efficient knowledge of midwifery, in addition to their general training) who shall be under the control of qualified medical practitioners, the papers were eminently unsatisfactory, chiefly because if these earnest workers for reform, who with the best intentions in the world "desire to ensure the care necessary for women in childbirth," are satisfied with so low and inefficient a standard of training and practical experience, as a three months' course of instruction only, and get a Bill passed granting legal status to women thus trained, we fear that the condition of the poor will be even worse than it is at present.

With much that Miss Paget says we are in sympathy; for instance, she points out the difficulty of any legislation being accomplished by men for women, to which we answer—work for the enfranchisement of women. She says: "In many matters concerning the safety of life and health far less vital than the one under discussion, public opinion has demanded safeguards against ignorance and incompetence. For example, no one can call himself a doctor of medicine, a surgeon, a dentist, a chemist, or a veterinary surgeon unless he has shown sufficient competence to be registered; in these cases, the whole community is protected by the measures obtained by those who were able to bring direct Parliamentary pressure to bear on the question. But with regard to the Registration of midwives, the one question where the interests of *one* part of the community only is concerned, even though, or is it because, that section consists entirely of women, no Act exists by which any standard of efficiency can be enforced, and the lives of the most important part of the nation—its mothers—are still entrusted to persons who may call themselves midwives, but who are, in many cases, absolutely untrained for the profession which they have adopted for their livelihood. There is no way by which the women of the working classes can ascertain whether the midwives they employ are adequately competent or dangerously ignorant."

And we would point out in this connection that until a thorough and efficient curriculum of training, which would naturally take much longer time than three months, is insisted upon, midwives, even if registered, will not be "adequately competent," but will remain "dangerously inefficient."

Miss Paget goes on to own that "As any person

is at liberty, by the law of the land, to render aid to any other in time of sickness, if desired, and any person is at liberty, by the law of the land, to receive such aid from any other, we cannot, of course, prevent people employing unqualified help, if they choose to do so at their own risk; we can only attempt to enable the poor to distinguish between the qualified and the unqualified. This is only to be done by the passing of an Act of Parliament rendering it unlawful in the future for anyone to call herself a Midwife until she has been examined by competent authorities, and received a certificate of efficiency."

This is the truth; no penal clause will ever be passed by Parliament, and the homely neighbour will in the future, as she has in the past, continue to help her poor sister in her hour of need.

Miss Paget then traced the existence of the Midwives in times past. She said:—

"To emphasise that Midwives are not new inventions, as some of the opponents of legislation have asserted, I will just mention that about the year B.C. 1635, Aben-Esdra tells us of Puah and Shiprah, chief Midwives among the Jews, under whom worked as many as 500 women, who were taught by them in the obstetric art. These were the Midwives who refused to abet Pharaoh in his designs against the Jewish infants, so the first thing heard of the craft is, therefore, distinctly to their professional credit.

You must take my word for it, that there is plenty of evidence to prove that up to the latter part of the seventeenth century Midwives were almost universally employed. After this (the time of the great Harvey), the great progress in medical science, and perhaps the ignorant presumptions of the Midwives themselves, caused a great deal of the Midwifery among the wealthier classes to fall into the hands of the medical profession, where it has since remained, though the Queens of England seem to have been attended by Midwives—even the mother of our own Queen kept to the custom of her own country, and was attended by a Midwife at the birth of Princess Victoria."

Coming down to our own times, several Bills (all of which have been severely condemned by practical persons), have been presented to Parliament, one in 1890 by the Midwives' Institute, amended by the Obstetrical Society, the British Medical Association, and a Select Committee of the House of Commons, but was talked out on the second reading by Mr. Bradlaugh, because he disapproved of Midwives being required to produce a certificate of moral character before Registration while medical men were not required to do so.

In May, 1895, a "Midwives' Registration Bill" was introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Balfour of Burleigh, and it was about to be submitted to a Committee of the House, when the Government resigned. Lord Balfour thereupon judged it better to withdraw the Bill.

This year the same Bill was introduced by Mr. Skewes Cox and Mr. Bonser, but the Government took the day it was down for second reading.

We are told a new Bill has been prepared by the Midwives' Bill Committee and will shortly be ready to introduce into the House.

Miss Paget says that "The opposition to the Registration of Midwives comes from two widely different sources: the lay opposition from rural philanthropists and a small section of ardent politicians of rather extreme views; the medical opposition from the smaller general practitioner, chiefly in the North of

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)