This project began as a personal quest for enlightenment. Ten years ago, awaiting the birth of my first child, I joined the continuum of expectant mothers who – before and since my time – have known the thrill and terror of impending parenthood. With little knowledge of babies and a desperate eagerness to learn, I did as required of graduate students: I made urgent treks to libraries, scanned child care tomes, took earnest notes. I purposefully interviewed my mother and every woman I knew who had had children. I consulted my doctor faithfully. By the time that my daughter arrived late one steamy August afternoon, I felt I had attained the requisite level of preparedness and then some. I was confident that I had grasped the latest childrearing precepts and that I had only to apply them for assured success.

Like countless other mothers, what I did not know, and could not have known, was that flesh-and-blood babies are not much like their textbook counterparts. By all objective medical standards, my daughter was “normal” and healthy. But she would not eat, sleep, or be comforted according to the books. She did not cry at the appropriate intervals sanctioned by the experts. Instead she ate little, slept fitfully, and cried incessantly. As did I, in light of what appeared to be futile hours of study, consultation, and stockpiling of child care manuals. The fledgling social historian learned the value of “lived experience” the hard way.

My personal experiment with scientific parenting led me to a series of historical questions. How, I wondered, had mothers learned about babies in the past? In particular, how had they learned the tricks of child care in the pre-Spockian dark ages? Had “professional” advisers for mothers always existed in some form? When and how had doctors
come to predominate in this area traditionally belonging to women? What kind of medical help was available to mothers before state medicare made health care accessible to all families regardless of their economic position? How had medicine's "onward march" during the past century influenced the health and well-being of mothers and children?

When I began this study of the child and maternal welfare campaign in early twentieth century Ontario, I was prepared to believe in the progressive model of medical advance. I learned that, much as with parenting experiences, the story is neither that simple nor that linear in development. The result is this book. It attempts to uncover, within the specific context of Ontario in the years 1900 to 1940, some of the social, economic, and ideological complexities underlying what have so long been considered the biologically ordained experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and child nurture.

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This book is dedicated with much love and appreciation to my children and my parents, from whom I have learned more than could be found in any number of documents, texts, and statistical tables. My children Stefanie (now 10) and Evan (now 5) literally inspired this study and have witnessed its entire development since
its infancy and their own. They are both healthy and bright despite their mother's anxieties, preoccupations, and outright mistakes. My parents, Bruno and Maria Comacchio, not only raised their children while making their difficult way in an unfamiliar culture, but have never failed to believe in us, and to help us wholeheartedly with our own. I can say it to them now: you were right.