REVIEWS

Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice
Colin Bell and Helen Roberts (eds)
Routledge & Kegan Paul, £6.95

With so much that needs to be read the student and researcher in nursing history may not see the relevance of this book to their specific field in the first instance, but it would be worth their while to set aside time for this readable book. Although not its primary aim, which is to reflect on the changed circumstances under which social science research is being carried out in this country as a result of the present financial stringencies, the book certainly puts primary, secondary and oral sources of nursing history into fresh perspective in a thoughtful way, and will assist the historian to assess their value in a different light. Written for the guidance and information of present day social researchers, each chapter contains good advice for researchers in many fields of social history, for, after all, the social research documents of today are sources for tomorrow's historian. This book should therefore stimulate those interested in nursing history to look a little more critically at source material and it could help him to avoid making too definite a supposition about what actually happened from limited and potentially biased records.

This warning is particularly clear in the introduction to the chapter by Ronald Frankenburg with the off-putting title, 'Incidence or incidents: political and methodological underpinnings of a health research process in a small Italian town'. Several of the titles may tempt the reader to skip whole chapters when dipping into the book at first, for it is indeed a book to be dipped into rather than read through from cover to cover. Yet references to the work of the other contributors gradually leads the reader back and forth until, surprisingly, there are no more chapters left to read.

There are constant reminders that records extant are most likely to be those of men, and less frequently of women, in authority who will already have manipulated the information therein. The point is most clearly made by Jalna Hanmer and Diana Leonard in the chapter on 'Negotiating the problem: the DHSS and research on violence in marriage' where they state that "Research methodology, with its emphasis on so called objectivity, was seen as inevitably leading both to a denial of reality and to the confirmation of the dominant ideology": a salutary reminder to the historian that this is just as likely to be so of the records of those men in authority, the Boards of Governors and of Guardians, the City Councils and National Government. Most records still available will not give the whole picture as long as the voice of the nurse at the bedside and the patient she is nursing is only faintly heard if at all.

Which brings us to the oral historian who would be of the first to recognise the value of this book, in particular Hilary Graham's chapter, 'Surveying through Stories'. The researcher who finds it difficult to obtain specific information from an elderly informant unwilling to be