and such was her fame that Princess Alice of Hesse-Darmstadt, Queen Victoria's daughter, requested a meeting and in 1876 was taken incognito on a tour of some of Octavia's properties. There followed a warm personal correspondence in which Octavia and the princess exchanged ideas about housing management in their respective countries.

Octavia was also a founding member of the National Trust, seeing it as an important way of preserving access to fresh air and open spaces for the masses who lived in the industrialised cities. Such was her skill at campaigning for this cause that during her lifetime no public appeal launched by the trust failed to reach its target.

It is a great shame that a biography of this remarkable woman should fail to inspire affection for her. Gillian Darley documents the major events of Octavia's life, and the book is undoubtedly a useful guide to the evolution of housing management policies, but it gives little insight into Octavia as a person. In over 300 pages the best description of what Octavia was really like comes in a quotation from one of her obituaries: "She was strong willed—some thought self willed—but the strong will was never used for self. She was impatient in little things, persistent with long suffering in big ones; often dictatorial in manner but humble to self effacement before those she loved or admired."

Octavia Hill: a Life. G Darley. (Pp 399; figs; £17.95.) London: Constable, 1990. ISBN 0-09-469380-3.

Something to say

Ann Oakley

The cover of *Reconstructing Babylon: Women and Technology* shows details from a Degas painting, "Semiramis Building Babylon." There are various versions of the story. According to one, Semiramis, Queen of Assyria, was an outstanding civil engineer. According to another, she was only acting on instructions from her son, and, although she might have had some responsibility for the famous hanging gardens, all the really important structural bits—the canals, the causeways, the bridges, and the renowned underwater pedestrian tunnel—could not possibly have been executed by a woman.

MUSEE D'ORSAY, PARIS

Detail from cover

The exact relevance of the title to the essays that make up the book is not clear. They, too, are diverse, covering contraception, environmental toxins, primary health care in the Third World, and reproduction. The editor and two of the authors run an intriguing organisation called the Institute on Women and Technology, which was set up in Massachusetts in 1987. *Reconstructing Babylon* is the first product of the institute, whose aim is "to analyse how technologies objectify, physically harm or marginalize women"; but also, one is glad to hear, "to advocate for technology that frees women from laborious work, that empowers women . . . that sustains the natural world."

Although the style of the essays, and certainly their political postures, may be guessed from these priorities, prejudice should not bar the medical reader from plundering the book's pages, as it has much that is at most shocking, and at least thought provoking, to offer.

I would recommend starting at the back, where an essay describing the singlehanded work of a black nurse, Maud Matthews, setting up a clinic in South Africa aptly reminds us that many of the world's women are suffering from not enough technology rather than too much. Maud Matthews's clinic doesn't even have running water, electricity, or a telephone. By comparison with that some of the detailed contractual reproductive agreements taken apart by Gena Corea in her essays on surrogate mothers strike one as incredibly sophisticated—surrogacy combined with superovulation, embryo flushing, and sex predetermination, for example—though I'm not sure "sophisticated" is the right word. Corea points out that there is nothing surrogate about housing a child in one's body and one's life, but use of the term denotes some of the ways in which women are treated within surrogacy arrangements. It's also a context in which unscientific medicine flourishes. For example, "surrogate" mothers are often legally enjoined to participate in a schedule for antenatal care that is punitive and must be medically unrewarding and are instructed to adopt abstemious lifestyles on little evidence that fetal welfare will be thus enhanced.

The appropriately named Dr Richard Seed was a Chicago cattle breeder before he moved on to manipulating human embryos; according to Corea, he sees gene manipulation as a means of practising eugenics: "Just trying to improve the human race is a good thing."

One unsurprising lesson of reproductive technology is that commercialism fosters damaging practices. Surrogacy agencies in the United States are said to be making themselves more cost effective by recruiting Third World women at lower rates to breed babies for American couples. Although the health impact of the profit motive is hardly an original lesson, it is to be hoped, though probably vainly, that the present British government will pay some attention to North American developments.

When the editor of *Reconstructing Babylon* says that what is needed is a framework of analysis and public policy on technology "centred on women's right to integrity and autonomy" I would preface that only by saying that we need a framework of analysis and public policy for its own sake. This is true of technology in general: even (particularly?) of the neat little portable computer on which I write this (and which may be giving me a headache). But many wise people have said for many years that health is too important to leave to doctors. The feminist demand for medical and other health affecting technologies to be democratically controlled is only a matter of common sense, really.

Reconstructing Babylon: Essays on Women and Technology. Ed H P Hynes. (Pp 239; £8.95 paperback.) London: Earthscan, 1989. ISBN 1-85383-057-7.