



# **The Machine in the Nursery: Incubator Technology and the Origins of Newborn Intensive Care (Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology)**

*Jeffrey P. Baker*

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In the late nineteenth century French obstetricians reported that a new medical device, the infant incubator, made possible the rearing of premature infants whose prospects until then had been nearly hopeless. The announcement set off a wave of enthusiasm that swept the United States. Hospitals opened the first premature infant nurseries, and incubator shows (complete with live infants) opened in numerous public fairs and expositions. Yet Americans did more than adopt the incubator; they reinvented it in the process. A simple domestic warming device became a complex life-support system intended to provide a complete artificial environment for the premature infant.

In *The Machine in the Nursery* Jeffrey Baker examines the transformation that overtook the incubator after it arrived from France in the United States. He argues that the apparatus furnishes an example of how social and cultural factors can fundamentally alter the evolution of medical technology. The analysis centers on the interaction between the technology and its intended "target," the premature infant.

To the extent that particular medical specialists in distinct institutions and cultures saw different populations of such infants, they were bound to interpret the incubator's purpose differently. The factors of institutional, professional, and national context?along with that of gender?were of special importance in shaping physicians' attitudes. Taken together, these elements enable us to understand the complex "branching" pattern that characterized development of the incubator in the early twentieth century.

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