

# Reviews

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## *Abortion Then and Now: New Zealand Abortion Stories from 1940 to 1980*

by Margaret Sparrow. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2010  
x, 304pp. ISBN 9780864736321

Reviewed by Barbara Brookes

If we have forgotten the damage done by restrictive abortion laws, this book provides a timely reminder. By seeking accounts of abortions and interviewing women, doctors and activists about their experiences, Margaret Sparrow has ensured that the stories of a criminal act will not be lost. Some women obviously found the opportunity to record their experience cathartic. The shame attached to abortion, and the horror of their circumstances, has often led women to keep their experience a secret.

Margaret Sparrow has organized the material chronologically, so that the first three chapters deal with the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s respectively. The 1930s defined the legal climate for the decades to come: *The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Various Aspects of the problem of Abortion in New Zealand* issued in 1937, and the English trial *R v Bourne*, which extended the grounds for therapeutic abortion to include the mental health of the mother. The decision as to the necessity for a 'therapeutic' abortion lay with the medical profession and most were reluctant to agree to such a procedure that was, in their eyes, a disreputable practice associated with 'back-street' practitioners.

The work of amateur operators was apparent in the sad tale of deaths from septic abortion which reached 32 in 1942. Before the advent of effective antibiotics, the results of instrumental interference in pregnancy could be disastrous. Nurses, who knew aseptic techniques, might offer reasonably safe services, but hairdressers and taxi-drivers employing crude methods could cause lasting damage, if not death. Some male operators expected sex as part payment for their services. Women were driven to comply out of desperation: they wanted to avoid childbearing at any cost. Often they began by taking pills (images of the available concoctions illustrate the book) then moved on to more invasive methods. Throughout *Abortion Then and Now* we get glimpses (mainly from newspaper reports) of the trade and trials of individuals, such as George Bettle, who provided abortion services.

The personal stories recorded in the book are deeply moving and show the complexity of the situations in which women found themselves. Sometimes

a pregnancy followed rapidly after a birth in an already large family; sometimes husbands were abusive and another child seemed impossible; sometimes women were pregnant to married men; and sometimes the time just wasn't right. In the background lie stories of the inadequacy of sex education and the imbalance of power between the sexes. We also see the growing contraceptive options as the IUD and the Pill came to be used more often in the 1960s, but often only for married women.

Chapter four is devoted to the police and the methods they used to track down and prosecute abortionists. Women police officers were used for entrapment. Some police officers were galvanized to support abortion law reform because of what they witnessed. It seemed wrong to them that because women were unable to access safe surgical abortions, they were forced into the criminal underworld. Greg Ford describes the police's actions in the 1960s as 'reactive'. 'It was accepted that abortion was a social crime within our midst, but cases were only dealt with when they came to notice. We raided places if it was relevant to an investigation, but we were not encouraged to seek out abortion cases.' Like many of the public who served on juries, members of the police had sympathy for the plight of women trapped by an unwanted pregnancy.

The personal stories that led to activism remind us that one did not have to have personal experience of abortion to be outraged at a system that compelled women to bear children they did not want. The campaigns of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child galvanized counteraction and young feminists supported a woman's right to choose.

The 1970s brought a decade of activism on the abortion issue and it is unsurprising that this is the most substantial chapter in the book. The chapter provides an overview of events and I'm sure that Margaret Sparrow would be the first to agree that the events of that decade could be the basis for a whole volume. The overwhelming question, not answered here, is why New Zealand ended up with a more conservative law in 1977 where elsewhere laws were being liberalized? The response of liberals was to immediately set up Sisters Overseas Service to send women to Australia.

This is not, however, a book that trawls through the recent academic work on 1970s feminism or reflects on the ways in which we like to tell our national story. Grace Millar's 2003 MA thesis from Victoria, for example, has a fascinating chapter on the feminist movement and abortion. *Abortion Then and Now* is rather concerned with keeping a public record of a troubled past in order that we remember that time. The oral histories of women, police, doctors and activists will be invaluable to future researchers and would, in all likelihood, have been lost without this initiative.