

Book review

ROUGH ON WOMEN: ABORTION IN 19TH-CENTURY NEW ZEALAND

Margaret Sparrow

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New Zealand generally prides itself as progressive on issues around women's rights and gender equality. However, New Zealand's abortion laws remain shamefully conservative. Pregnancy terminations are only permitted on restrictive grounds that, alarmingly, excludes pregnancy resulting from rape. Far from being a woman's right to choose, the contemporary situation is one where access to abortion lies in the hands of others – two certified consultants must recommend abortion on the grounds that continuing with the pregnancy would result in serious danger to the woman or girl. Fortunately, doctors who make such recommendations currently have a broad interpretation of risk that includes, in practice, any unwanted pregnancy. However, the current situation could easily change if a vocal but minority conservative voice were to be successful in demanding doctors follow the letter of the law more closely. Clearly, the abortion rights struggle persists, and feminists may yet have to mobilise to keep the few gains that have been made towards women's access to safe abortions.

This book is a further important contribution from Margaret Sparrow towards the abortion rights effort. It is written to promote a better understanding of the historical context of abortion, with a view to learning from the past in order to create a society where every pregnancy is celebrated and all children are wanted. Margaret Sparrow was president of the Abortion Law Reform Association for 32 years. In her medical career as a physician, her practical contribution to reducing unwanted pregnancies was in performing over 1000 vasectomies (Abortion Law Reform Association New Zealand, 2011). In 2002, she was made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her service to sexual and reproductive health. In Wellington, a family planning clinic proudly bears her name. Her position on abortion supports an international trend, not yet followed in New Zealand, where sexual and reproductive rights are viewed as health issues not criminal matters.

This book is something of a prequel to an earlier work by Sparrow (2010) titled *Abortion Then and Now: New Zealand Abortion Stories From 1940 to 1980* (see Weatherall, 2011). This one moves further back in time – beyond living memories – to provide the historical and social context of abortion in the nineteenth century. For *Abortion Then and Now*, personal stories of abortion experiences were collected and represented, which was obviously not possible for the current book. Instead, the accounts came from archived coroner's reports and newspaper articles that largely concerned court cases. Consequentially, the reader learns more about the lives of the abortionists and the inadequacies of the criminal justice system of the time than about the individual women and the desperate circumstances that drove them to try to terminate a pregnancy.

The accounts of women that are presented are necessarily the tragic cases, because they are typically criminal reports that describe the rather gruesome deaths of women either from overdoses of the poisons believed to induce miscarriage or haemorrhaging and infections subsequent to a surgical intervention. However, Sparrow notes that, in all likelihood, the available records give a negatively skewed view of mortality rates because they were the ones subject to investigation. The stories behind successful cases are simply lost – untold because of the illegality of procuring an abortion and the social mores that led to guilt and shame about unwanted pregnancies.

The book has 11 substantive chapters. The first outlines the very limited choices available to women with unwanted pregnancies. The second chapter explains contraception as it was available in the nineteenth century. The third and fourth chapters describe the laws around abortion at that time and how the Coroner's Court and Courts of Justice functioned with respect to abortion cases. Then there are six chapters each with a focus on the roles of a particular group, including doctors who became abortionists, bogus doctors, chemists, female abortionists, others that aided and abetted and women who attempted self-abortion.

Regarding doctors who became abortionists, Sparrow is largely sympathetic to them. She points out they must have been socially aware and compassionate to women's plight. Furthermore, they put themselves at personal risk by providing the necessary but illegal service. Sparrow noted that, even today, being an abortionist is a stigmatised rather than celebrated professional specialisation.

The final chapter crystallises the important lessons that can be learnt from the history of abortion in New Zealand. There is significant health and social benefits in allowing women control over their fertility and in preventing unsafe abortions. Another message to be gleaned is a continuing disconnect between the law and medical practice. Today, as in the nineteenth century, laws are ineffective at preventing and controlling abortions. For Sparrow, the reason for that ineffectiveness is that abortion is not a crime and should not be treated as such. Rather it is a public health issue that can be best addressed by education about and access to contraception and safe available abortion, if necessary.

Overall, the book is written with a high level of scholarship. Sources of information are meticulously end-noted, and a comprehensive bibliography is provided. Images pepper the text and bring it to life. There are photos of the people being described, pictures of the pills, potions and paraphernalia that were the contraceptives of the nineteenth century and examples of relevant newspaper cartoons and classified ads. Throughout the book, Sparrow maintains an objective perspective, presenting her views as scientifically informed, non-judgemental about sex and sexuality, and in the best interests of a well-functioning healthy society.

This book on abortion, alongside other recent publications (e.g. McCulloch, 2013), makes publically and widely available intelligent, balanced commentary on abortion. They make crucial reading for anyone interested in history and women's rights in New Zealand, particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health. For abortion rights activists, the book provides sound evidence in support of women's sexual and reproductive rights. It is a key resource for keeping alive the mistakes of the past in order to better evaluate the present and plan for the future. Furthermore, it is a positive legacy from the many nineteenth century women who suffered or died from unwanted pregnancies.

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