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From of the Gutter of Obscenity: Review of The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900-1928. Edited by Esther Katz; Cathy Moran Hajo and Peter C. Engelman, assistant editors.

Jimmy Wilkinson Meyer
Independent Historian

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From of the Gutter of Obscenity

Jimmy Wilkinson Meyer

*The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928.*

Alluring and charismatic, arrogant and power-hungry, naïve and loveable, cranky and selfish, nasty enemy, irresponsible parent, fast friend. People have used these epithets, and many more, to describe Margaret Higgins Sanger. Over 40 years after her death, her name evokes strong emotion in activists to the left and to the right of center. Some call her a hero, others see her as an opportunist at best, a racist at worst—"Hitler in a skirt." ¹ But anyone who really "knows" Margaret Sanger (MS) will agree on these facts: she was controversial and unconventional, and she maintained throughout her life (1879–1966) an unflagging devotion to increasing access to reliable, legal contraception for women. In 1998 *Time* magazine named MS as one of the world's 100 most influential people.² Anyone who's not yet familiar with this evocative woman and her activism can get better acquainted by perusing *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928.* Likewise, anyone who thinks that they already know MS will discover more about her complicated life and advocacy in this award-winning work. And the journey will be delightful.

Esther Katz, PhD, editor and director of New York University's Margaret Sanger Papers Project (MSPP), plans four volumes in this series, with MS's activities in the international birth control movement to appear in Volume Four. In 2004 the journal *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries*


included *The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928* on its list of “Outstanding Academic Titles.”³ Volume Two, *Birth Control Comes of Age*, released in March of 2007, covers MS’s life and work between 1928 and 1939.⁴ The goal of the series, says Katz, is “to highlight Sanger’s distinctive voice and illumine the multiple narratives of her life and work” (xxvii). Katz created the MSPP in 1985 “to locate, arrange, edit, research, and publish the papers of the noted birth control pioneer.”⁵ For the first decade or so, MSPP staff concentrated on the arduous task of locating, arranging, editing, and researching—mining archives in the U.S. and around the world for papers or records related to MS. Katz and her team published two comprehensive microfilm versions of MS’s papers, with printed guides, in the mid-1990s.⁶ They then began culling selections from this corpus to include in the printed series of collected documents.

What a chore it must be to choose from MS’s archive of over 120,000 items—representing all varieties of personal, organizational, and legal records. In the statement of editorial method for Volume One, the editors note that they narrowed the field by focusing almost exclusively on personal material, including diary entries, essays, and key speeches and testimony by MS. About 80 percent of the documents here are letters, sent and received by MS. A few representative letters to MS from women seeking birth control information or services appear in this collection, but only a few. Many such letters are already accessible in MS’s *Motherhood in Bondage*, reprinted by Ohio State University Press.⁷

The editors of *The Woman Rebel* hoped that their selections would “document critical events, major themes, and central issues in Sanger’s life ... and ... reveal her thought processes and modes of expression” (xxvii). The 250

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selections, most of them previously unpublished, cover the period from 1900, when MS was 20 years old and entering nurses training, through June of 1928, when she resigned from the presidency of the organization that she had founded, the American Birth Control League (ABCL). The bulk of the papers, however—about 85 percent—refer to the years between 1914 and 1928. During this era, MS honed her advocacy skills, tangled with the law, and brought birth control, and herself, before the public eye. She also married, bore three children, traveled widely, took several lovers, buried her young daughter, divorced, and married again. In The Woman Rebel, one can find something relating to each of these life adventures, and much more.

Born in Corning, N.Y., Margaret Louise Higgins was the sixth of the eleven surviving children of Irish Americans Michael and Anne Purcell Higgins. Anne Higgins endured countless miscarriages, in addition to twelve pregnancies carried to term, before dying at age 50 of tuberculosis. Including MS, four Higgins daughters and six sons lived to adulthood. A brief introduction to this volume sketches the hardscrabble life of young MS and her siblings, a life that helped to shape her destiny. The editor posits that MS's mother's ill health and many pregnancies and her father's vocal advocacy of socialism and criticism of the Catholic church (to the detriment of his stonecutting business) influenced MS's activism (xxiii-xxiv). A helpful timeline of Sanger's life and work (xxxvii-xxxviii) follows the introduction and statement of editorial method.

MS left the parish Catholic school just before graduation and, assisted by her older sisters, finished her formal education with two years at Claverack College and Hudson River Institute, a coeducational secondary school (xxiv). Financial circumstances compelled her to work as a teacher for a year before returning home to care for her ailing mother and the rest of the family. During this time, MS was infected with tuberculosis of the adrenal glands, a condition that she would fight for most of her life. Anne Higgins's illness and death fueled MS's aspirations to study medicine. She had trained in nursing for two years at White Plains Hospital, near New York City, when she met William Sanger, a draftsman and artist. Smitten, he refused to defer his dream of MS and himself in a "little home nestled among the trees," as he wrote to MS in May of 1902 (9). Instead Bill Sanger arranged for a surprise wedding in August of 1902.

“That man of mine simply carried me off,” MS wrote to her sister, Anna, a few days later, “he made me marry him ‘now or never’ ... ” (13). MS seemed to be alternately infuriated and flattered by such presumption but
soon quit nursing school to try her hand at being a wife and mother. Along the way, influenced by Bill Sanger’s circle, MS became acquainted with New York City’s radical community. Her own circle of friends soon expanded to include free lovers, anarchists, socialists, and labor organizers.

In the present volume, the documents that tell this story are arranged chronologically and grouped into eight chapters, representing periods of MS’s life: “A Nurse’s Education”; “A Radical in Bohemia”; “The Woman Rebel”; “Exile and Renewal”; “The Birth of the Birth Control Movement”; “Organization and Professionalization”; “A Legal Clinic”; and “Beyond the American Birth Control League.” Organizing the material under these broad headings adds to the book’s usefulness and appeal. If the reader is interested only in a certain era, such as when MS fled to Europe in 1914 after being charged with mailing obscene matter, the chapter headings make it easy to quickly locate the pertinent documents, rather than having to go through a long list, as in The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.8 The index of the present volume is most thorough, with almost three columns of entries under MS, for example. Biographical information about individuals is highlighted in boldface, as are letters from specific individuals to MS.

Each chapter in The Woman Rebel begins with a short explanation, and brief headnotes precede many of the individual selections. Source notes after each document delineate the form of the original—typescript, draft, carbon, signed, or transcribed, etc.—note the archival source, and cite the document’s location on the microfilm version. Meticulous endnotes offer background information for names, events, and geographical and literary references. One example of the care taken in these notes is in an excerpt from the pamphlet “English Methods of Birth Control: ‘Are Preventive Methods Injurious to Health?’” (118–120). Here MS cites the statement of “a prominent authority, Wille (as quoted by Kisch) …” (118). In the endnote to this quote-within-a-quote, the editors compare the statements in question, having tracked down the quotations, the sources, and the biographical information for the “authorities,” Bruno Wille and Enoch Heinrich Kisch (120n1).

Another example of the thorough nature of the endnotes follows a long letter from MS to Charles and Bessie Drysdale, dated 9 August 1916 (185–193). MS describes her whirlwind lecture tour across the U.S., noting

the cities where she spoke, the way people in each location responded to her, and the birth control organizations that got started during or after her visit. The copious endnotes to this letter detail the dates of MS's speeches in various cities, give the names of local organizers, and tell us which locations refused to host MS. In addition they name and tell a bit about each group that formed in response to Sanger's visit and—how long lived they were, etc. This represents only one of the places in this book where the endnotes are as intriguing as the document itself!

Checking the information about supporters of MS who hailed from Cleveland, Ohio, did turn up a minor error. A 1917 letter from MS to her good friend, Juliet Barrett Rublee, mentions Rublee's mother in passing (219). An endnote correctly identifies Rublee's mother as Alice Delia Brush Barrett but says that Alice was the daughter of Cleveland inventor Charles Francis Brush. In fact Alice Brush Barrett was Brush's sister and Juliet Rublee, his niece. On the positive side, this reference provides an example of one of the book's strengths. Katz and her team cite forty-one archival collections, in addition to MS's, and twenty-five repositories as sources for The Woman Rebel (xxxii–xxxvi). This volume plumbs the depths of MS's influence and charisma, and its documents reflect her broad network of supporters and friends.

MS's network included such personages as British physician and psychologist Havelock Ellis, her mentor and lover, and novelist H. G. Wells. She corresponded with people such as George Bernard Shaw (411–12), Carrie Chapman Catt (290), and Max Eastman (176–77). In The Woman Rebel the reader can glimpse MS's irascible side. Many friendships fell victim to her single-minded nature, friendships with people such as activists Emma Goldman and Mary Ware Dennett and Dorothy Bocker, the first physician of MS's Clinical Research Bureau. A heart-wrenching letter illustrates the distant relationship that MS had with her children. At age 10, MS's son, Grant, wrote on 17 November 1918, from boarding school, "Dear Mother, I received the marshmellows. Thank you very much. Mother will you come down on Thanksgiving Day? Now you put down on your engagement book, 'Nov. 28 Go down to see Grant.' Ans. soon. Lots of love Grant" (241). The endnote tells us that MS did not follow up on Grant's poignant invitation.

The Woman Rebel generally lets MS speak for herself, avoiding the temptation of interpreting the life of such an intriguing, and sometimes aggravat-

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The brevity of the chapter introductions can lead to a bit of confusion, however. MS's attitude on abortion represents one example. In the excerpt from “Family Limitation: A Nurse’s Advice to Women” (87–90), estimated to have been written in October of 1914, MS treats abortion matter-of-factly. MS’s “nurses’s advice” focuses on the importance of paying close attention to one's menstrual cycle. MS recommends that women use Beecham's Pills “four days before menstruation” to cleanse the bowels and “assist with the menstrual flow.” But if that does not work, MS counsels the use of quinine, which takes “from four to six days to bring about the desired results.” If that still does not do the trick, says MS, “then the only remedy is an abortion .... If you are going to have an abortion, make up your mind to it in the first stages, and have it done” (88–89). The editors do not comment here on MS's tacit acceptance of abortion, which was illegal in the U.S. until 1973. Any “surgical” abortion procured before that time had to be done by a sympathetic midwife or physician or on the back streets, outside of the law. MS later backtracked, promoting birth control as a solution to the scourge of criminal abortion (381). The only hint that such forthright advice in this early edition of the popular “Family Limitation” might present problems for MS appears in an endnote after the excerpt, without further explanation: “MS deleted this reference in the 1920 version and all subsequent editions of the pamphlet” (90n2).

We learn later in this volume that the passage did present a problem. In 1915 MS had to respond to an accusation by British birth control advocate Marie Stopes that, according to “Family Limitation,” MS condoned abortion (164–165). In the endnote to this letter, the editors tell us that MS did in fact condone abortion “at that time” (165n4), though MS herself argued the contrary in her response to Stopes (164). MS later clearly stated her opposition in a form letter to someone inquiring about abortion (381). Early North American birth control clinics publicly opposed abortion and touted better

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11 The Woman Rebel’s editors note that laxatives were often used as abortifacients, with no scientific basis (90n2). Quinine, on the other hand, was effective in stimulating uterine contractions but could poison in large doses (90n1). Women often tried to abort themselves. See Linda Gordon, The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 17–18, and Leslie J. Reagan, When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
access to contraception as making abortions unnecessary. At MS’s Clinical Research Bureau beginning in 1923, we learn in the introduction to chapter seven, “... patients seeking abortions were officially turned away” (349), although staff may have given referrals privately (351n4).

MS and other birth control activists of her era did not publicly advocate the right to have an abortion. Their work flaunted the federal and state Comstock Laws that banned birth control information and devices as obscene. These advocates felt that to include abortion among their official services would further antagonize physicians and jeopardize the already tentative cause. This represents a critical historical point, one that some present-day activists find hard to grasp. How could someone who fervently championed safe and legal birth control oppose one’s right to end her own pregnancy? This opposition on the part of most early advocates of contraception profoundly affected the movement. Planned Parenthood clinics in the twenty-first century still face opposition to abortion services, in part because of this legacy. More editorial explanation of the historical context might have clarified the complexities of MS’s abortion pronouncements.

The Woman Rebel greatly improves the access to the whole body of MS’s papers. It provides a representative selection, with source and background information. This volume acts as an introduction not only to MS’s life and work but also to the wealth of material available on the 100 reels of MS’s microfilmed archives. The filmed collections are available in only about 35 U.S. libraries. Printed guides exist, but the process of requesting a guide through interlibrary loan, figuring out which rolls of film one needs, and then requesting them and finding the selections on the specific rolls can consume precious research time.

The critical nature of this volume of MS’s selected documents lies not only in the selections presented for the first time in print but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the timeliness of the work. Twenty-first-century American women face dwindling reproductive health choices and services.


14Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland (Ohio) only began offering abortion services in 1997, after years of planning. Two years later, PPGC had to wage a nine-month battle with the city council of a western suburb before it could open a birth control clinic in that location. PPGC, “Celebrating 75 Years” (2003), n.p.
Women cannot always purchase over-the-counter emergency contraception or even properly prescribed birth control pills from their local pharmacies. Health care providers suffer repercussions for advising women about all of their reproductive options, including that of abortion. Expensive genetic and high-tech artificial insemination procedures add to the complex nature of planning one’s family.15

For over half a century, Margaret Sanger tried to pull sexuality and birth control “out of the gutter of obscenity and into the light of human understanding” (176). The history of her work, presented in this well-crafted volume and presumably in the others in the series edited by Katz and her team, should enlighten modern women. We need to hear the tale of Sanger’s hard-fought battle to fully comprehend the dangerous health care precipice on which women stand today. Hopefully Sanger’s work will inspire us to confront and change public policy, so that her efforts will not have been in vain.