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A Place in the Sun: Review of *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 2: Birth Control Comes of Age, 1928–1939*. Edited by Esther Katz; Peter C. Engelman and Cathy Moran Hajo, Associate Editors; Amy Flanders, Assistant Editor.

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A Place in the Sun

Jimmy Wilkinson Meyer

The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 2: Birth Control Comes of Age, 1928–1939. Edited by Esther Katz; Peter C. Engelman and Cathy Moran Hajo, Associate Editors; Amy Flanders, Assistant Editor. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 528 pp. ISBN Hardcover 0-252-031377, \$65.00.

Birth control advocate Margaret Sanger (MS) was, and still is, both revered and reviled for her efforts to move contraception out from the shadows of illegality and obscenity into the light of widespread acceptance. During her radical activist days (1910s–1920s), MS honed her leadership, networking, and speechmaking skills and often depended on direct action to further her cause.¹ By 1930 she had departed from her radical cohorts but continued to employ her broadening network of contacts. *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 2: Birth Control Comes of Age, 1928–1939* covers the efforts and life of MS during this era. In addition to speeches, conferences, and correspondence, in the 1930s MS took her struggle to the halls of Congress, the sound waves of radio (406), and the emerging media of film (19–20). As in her early years, her personality destroyed some alliances and cemented others. Through it all, she never forgot the women for whom she was fighting, often replying to those who wrote to solicit her assistance (123–24, 195). Refusing to settle into a comfortable middle age, MS instead shifted her tactics and her focus.

This book represents the second volume in a proposed series of four, with the last to cover the international work of MS. Created in 1985, the Margaret Sanger Papers Project (MSPP) at New York University, directed

¹ See *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928*, edited by Esther Katz; Peter Engelman and Cathy Moran Hajo, associate editors; Amy Flanders, assistant editor (*Urbana Champaign*: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

by Esther Katz, sought, collected, arranged, and filmed documents of MS before choosing from that imposing archive the selections to include in the printed series.² *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928* (2003) was previously reviewed for this publication.³

Birth Control Comes of Age takes the story of Margaret Sanger's life and activism through the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, from the departure of MS from the birth control organization that she had founded during her congressional lobbying days to the critical One Package court decision. The reader not only learns about the depth of MS's commitment to the cause but also about her relationship with her second husband, Three-in-One Oil magnate J. Noah Slee, and with other men in her life, and about her interpretation of eugenic principles, to name only two of the many themes of this period in her life.

As in the previous volume, the editors concentrate here on the actual words of MS. About 88 percent of the documents in *Birth Control Comes of Age* are letters, mostly written by MS. The other selections represent journal entries, a few speeches and articles, and congressional testimony given by MS. The editors faithfully reproduce the original text, complete with underlining, capital letters used for emphasis, words crossed out or inserted, and misspelled words (xxix, xxxi).

The editors cite forty manuscript collections and repositories as sources for this work. This volume is sixteen pages longer than the first, but it covers only eleven years, while the first volume covers twenty-eight. The present work includes the same type of detailed and helpful index as does *Volume 1* and the same meticulous documentation, with source notes for each selection and what one reviewer calls "heroically comprehensive footnotes."⁴ The editors have indeed "heroically" attempted to identify in the endnotes for each document every person mentioned therein, with birth and death dates and information about their connections to MS. Brief explanatory headnotes precede most documents. Each volume features a chronology of the years covered, and the one in *Volume 2* adds a few key entries (births, deaths, marriages, etc.) that occurred before 1928, to better orient the reader (xxxix–xl). Arranged chronologically, the collection is divided into

² The collection of Sanger documents contains approximately 120,000 items (xxix). See the two-series microfilm, *The Margaret Sanger Papers [microform]: Smith College Collections and Collected Documents Series* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1996, 1997) and *The Papers of Margaret Sanger [microform]*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³ Jimmy Wilkinson Meyer, "From the Gutter of Obscenity," *Documentary Editing*, 28, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 187–94.

⁴ Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "Sanger vs. Sanger," *The Nation* (July 30, 2007). <http://www.thenation.com/20070730/tuhus-dubrow>. Accessed Jan. 2, 2008.

eight chapters, with a short essay introducing each chapter. Two sections of photos, graphics, and other illustrative material, each ten to twelve pages long, add appeal and hint at Sanger's charisma and charm.

In Chapter 1, "Vying for Control," the reader gets a sense of the conflict between MS and the American Birth Control League (ABCL), conflict that resulted in Sanger's resignation from her posts as editor of *The Birth Control Review* and director of the ABCL (18). Documents in this chapter also tell of the 1929 police raid on MS's Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCCRB) in New York City and of MS's reaction (23-24, 29-32). The raid made MS and birth control front-page news (not for the first time) and marked a turning point in the attitude of the medical profession toward contraception.

Many physicians, while not necessarily birth-control advocates, were appalled that the police had seized the patient records of the BCCRB. In her exuberant style, MS wrote to friend and supporter Juliet Barrett Rublee, "The whole raid has brought people to us by the thousands & now the Doctors are considering taking over the Clinic!" (30). To her mentor and sometime lover Havelock Ellis, she wrote of the raid, "It put us ten years ahead," in part because physicians testified to the favorable impact of spacing pregnancies two to three years apart (33). While it would be another eight years before the American Medical Association gave its official nod to contraception, MS was correct. In 1929 some doctors did see a need for medical supervision of birth control, heretofore relegated to drugstores, barbershops, and black-market entrepreneurs.⁵ While the professionalization of contraception as a medical matter may have added credibility, feminist historians of the twenty-first century look back and see it as detrimental, as pushing the movement away from its roots in direct action.⁶

The next few chapters depict MS as a lobbyist. While Ellen Chesler's biography, *Woman of Valor*, includes a chapter on MS's lobbying activities, the documents in *Birth Control Comes of Age* more fully demonstrate the tedious nature of almost a decade of work by the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control (NCFLBC).⁷ MS founded this

⁵ Jimmy Elaine Wilkinson Meyer, *Any Friend of the Movement: Networking for Birth Control, 1920-1940* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 15; Jimmy Wilkinson Meyer, "Motherhood and Morality," *ACOG Clinical Review* (December 1996): 14ff.; and Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A history of contraceptives in America* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002).

⁶ See for example, Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 66.

organization in April 1929, only a few months after she resigned from the ABCL (xxxix). She employed it not only to push for new legislation favorable to the cause but also to keep that cause—and her leadership of it—in the public eye (59–60). By May of the next year, the NCFLBC had succeeded in getting a bill introduced into the U.S. Senate. Supporters hoped that the proposed law would clear the way, on a national level, for physicians to legally order, receive, prescribe, and dispense contraceptives (xxxix). But getting a “doctor’s only” bill *passed* in either house of Congress, let alone both, presented a mighty challenge, as the documents in this and the next few chapters reveal.

Chapter 2, “Bills to Write, Bills to Pay,” focuses on Sanger’s decision to begin this legislative effort as well as on the struggle she and her financiers faced to keep the BCCCRB and the NCFLBC afloat at the beginning of the Great Depression. Chapter 3, “Mrs. Sanger Goes to Washington,” begins with MS’s move to Washington, D.C., in 1931, better to supervise the lobbying endeavor. The documents in this chapter detail the daunting yet determined attempts by a broad network of NCFLBC committee members to convince congressional leaders to sponsor or support a birth-control bill. Between 1930 and 1937, the NCFLBC got nine such bills introduced into Congress. Few got out of committee; none came close to becoming law (xxix–xl). One of the difficulties was religious opposition to the very idea of birth control.

Late in 1930 Pope Pius XI had issued a special encyclical to clarify the position of the Roman Catholic Church on contraception. The Pope called anything that prevented the natural generation of life “an offense against the law of God and of nature,” and warned that “those who indulge in such [acts] are branded with the guilt of a grave sin” (149). Many legislators expressed fears about the repercussions of backing birth control among their constituents, especially Catholics in their districts (124, 126–27). Meanwhile, Catholic women flocked to the BCCRB and other birth control clinics of the era along with their Protestant and Jewish counterparts (151n1).⁸ Sanger reacted to the Pope’s declaration with some cynicism and ranted against Catholic opposition when she got a chance (146–54, 166).

⁷ Ellen Chesler. *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 313–35.

⁸ See also, for example, Meyer, *Any Friend*, 104.

While MS led the fight for legislative action, she pitched birth control as a reform worthy of FDR's New Deal, although she got no direct support from the White House (203–04, 293, 294n7). MS was also setting in place a challenge of a different sort. Two documents in Chapters 4, "A New Deal for Birth Control," and 5, "Hard Times," tell of the U.S. Customs seizure of a shipment of pessaries (also called diaphragms) from Japan designated for the BCCRB. The Customs Office held them as "immoral articles" under the Tariff Act of 1930 (210). To test the tariff regulation's boundaries, MS ordered one package of the same objects to be sent from Japan to Dr. Hannah Stone at the BCCRB. Would it be acceptable for a physician to receive such "immoral articles" if they were intended for a medical purpose? When the package was again detained, MS worked with an attorney to present this as a test case (231–32, 353–54). On January 7, 1936, a staff member telegraphed, "JAPANESE CASE VICTORY. CONGRATULATIONS" (355). The judge had held that the law could not be taken literally and offered an exception for items intended for medical purposes (355). The decision was upheld on appeal later that year (357, 388–89).

The *One Package* case, MS believed, took away the necessity for further legislative action, and the NCFLBC soon disbanded (356–57). MS's work continued, however, as related in Chapter 6, "A New Day Dawns for Birth Control." She organized a medical conference and focused on the BCCRB. After the AMA finally recognized birth control as a legitimate medical concern in 1937, Sanger told a radio audience, "Birth control, twenty years ago outlawed, reviled, has won its place in the sun" (406). *Birth Control Comes of Age* includes a photo of Sanger's journal entry for that day, "Newspapers headline A.M.A. at Atlantic City endorse BC!! Good resolution covers all we hoped for."

MS's next task was to unify the movement that had split almost a decade earlier. In Chapter 7, "A Common Cause," and Chapter 8, "Creating a World of Tomorrow," the documents tell of the merging of the ABCL and the BCCRB into the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA), of MS moving to Tucson and passing on the gavel, and of the shift in the movement's emphasis from birth control or family limitation to "family planning" (470). The BCFA used the theme of the 1939 New York World's Fair for its fundraising dinner that year, "Creating the World of Tomorrow" (470). The outbreak of World War II, however, soon dashed the hopes for a bright world of tomorrow, at least in the short term.

Birth Control Comes of Age continues the important story begun by Volume 1 of this series. It brings to print for the first time documents that are valuable for the tales they tell about activism and advocacy, as well as about the life and work of MS. In this day of quick, do-it-yourself publishing, it's reassuring that scholars such as Katz and her editorial team continue to pay close attention to detail and historical context in order to present a factual and objective collection of primary sources. And, luckily for us, as the book's acknowledgments state, "it's not over yet!" (xxi)