

Reappraising a Birth Control Pioneer

New biography chronicles Margaret Sanger's fight for family planning

By Donald A. Collins

During her lifetime and in the years since her death in 1966, Margaret Sanger has been the object of vicious media attacks for her alleged fealty to eugenics and her unrelenting passion to provide women contraceptive choice so they could be in charge of when or if they wanted to be mothers. Today, sadly, so many of our politicians continue attacking the right of women to decide when to bear a child. Consequently, it is not hard to imagine how even offering contraceptives was a crime as Sanger started fighting for that simple right early in the twentieth century.

There still remains so much enmity for women's reproductive rights that many leaders of lesser backbone have chosen not to stand up for what she espoused. The enemies of family planning have persistently and evilly cherry picked from her history — material which they call factual — but which in reality stands small in the continuum of her primary goal, namely making sure every woman had access to the means of contraception.

This is why I so enjoyed Miriam Reed's *Margaret Sanger: Her Life In Her Words*, a biography published in 2003, which contains a foreword by one of her granddaughters, Margaret Sanger Lampe. http://www.amazon.com/Margaret-Sanger-Her-Life-Words/dp/1569802467/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1321924159&sr=1-1

Lampe recalls some of her personal memories of her grandmother. One partial paragraph from her Preface gives one the flavor:

She was a red head, which she maintained with the help of a beauty parlor for most of her life. She was small and soft spoken and had a beautiful voice. When she talked to

Donald A. Collins, a family planning activist, has served as an officer and/or board member of many family planning NGOs, including Planned Parenthood Federation, for over 40 years.

you, you were the most important person in the room.... She loved children, dogs and good food, parties, people, life. She was active and traveled constantly, speaking to groups throughout the world. She had many friends and was a great correspondent. She was a very hard worker. So Reed lets you hear in this book directly from Sanger on everything—like the piece about her jail time, “Why I went to Jail”.

It was therefore particularly refreshing that an excellent recent book by Jean H. Baker, *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*, took the high road about her impact, instead of the low road of her critics, who constantly distort her flirtation with people involved in the then pervasive eugenics movement, her multiple love affairs, and her often tempestuous relations with other family-planning colleagues, whom she saw as not aggressive enough in forwarding her vision of universal availability of birth control methods.

Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion
by Jean H. Baker
Hill and Wang, 2011
368 pp., \$35



A *Kirkus* review from July 2011, efficiently covers the main points of this professional historian's account:

A sympathetic biography that seeks to clear the noted birth-control pioneer's name of the charges of elitism and racism, which have darkened her reputation in recent years.

Feminist historian Baker [professor of history at Goucher College and the author of *Sisters: Lives of America's Suffragists*] tells both Margaret Sanger's (1879–1966) personal and public stories. Born to a large, poor Irish fam-

ily, Sanger transformed herself from middle-class housewife to internationally renowned sex educator. Although trained as a nurse, she left school before earning a degree and consequently worked primarily as a midwife in New York's Lower East Side. It was the death of a young woman from a self-induced abortion that impelled her to take up the cause of women's rights to contraception. Baker chronicles her early years as an activist, mingling with bohemian intellectuals and developing her skills of writing, organizing and fund raising. For her forthright language on sexual matters, she was charged in 1914 with violating the Comstock anti-obscenity laws. The charges were later dropped, but Sanger was imprisoned briefly in 1917 for opening a clinic and disseminating forbidden information. Into her account of Sanger's years of activism, the author weaves the story of her several debilitating illnesses, her two marriages and numerous sexual alliances, her encounters with the famous (e.g., Havelock Ellis and Mahatma Gandhi), and her gradual displacement as leader of the birth-control movement. Baker ably illuminates the time period, making clear the attitudes that Sanger confronted and the political and religious forces that were arrayed against her. She acknowledges Sanger's support of eugenics but asserts that Sanger was being pragmatic, requiring allies and finding many in the then-popular eugenics movement. Baker also asserts that to label her as racist is an unjust tactic of pro-life groups and that, in her day, Sanger, who opposed segregation, was more racially tolerant than most Americans. A wealth of information about the birth-control movement and the dedicated woman who was long at the center of it.

The *Kirkus* account should have noted Sanger's most important initiative: her vital role in getting the birth control pill for women, which has changed the whole landscape of contraception worldwide. The author does a complete job of telling this vital part of her life's story (pp. 290 to 298).

In the early 1950s, Sanger, with financial assistance

from her long-time friend, Katherine Dexter McCormick, the Chicago heiress to the International Harvester fortune, supported the work of Dr. Gregory Pincus, and his colleague, Min Chueh Chang, at the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology (WFEB) — now part of the University of Massachusetts Medical School — in developing the birth control pill, which was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1960.

Other heroes helped, of course. For example, Dr. John Rock, a patrician Boston medical figure, who was a practicing Catholic, is highlighted for pushing “a somnolent Food and Drug Administration.” The usual pressure for some time not to approve the pill came from “Catholic watchdogs,” who called it a “death pill.” At one point Rock angrily urges the pill's (later called Enovid) FDA reviewer, a Catholic OB GYN, Dr. Pascale DeFelice, “to support the license, even shaking him by the shoulders at one point in their discussions.”

My career in the family planning field began just about the time Sanger died. However, in 1966, I had the honor of meeting Pincus' assistant, Dr. Chang, on two occasions. On the second, I asked him how he and Pincus knew what the proper dosages should be in their first approved pills. “We didn't,” he replied candidly. Those early pills proved to have dosages which were too high, and it took time to get to the present low-dose versions that have become so vital to giving women that simple, safe reproductive option. But the lesson all bureaucracies could and should learn but seldom do from this dramatic pioneering breakthrough is not to let something excellent be deferred or undone until we get to the perfect.

In short, Baker gives us an excellent account, sympathetic to this icon of feminist freedom, but not failing to point out her warts, her human failings, and her interesting idiosyncrasies.

Perhaps, with the passage of time, the story about Sanger's important life might not have reached many younger women. For those with a minimal knowledge about Sanger and her immense legacy, this is the Sanger biography you should read for a fair appraisal of a life of supreme importance to women and humanity. ■

