

Marie Carmichael Stopes: pioneer of birth control for women

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Marie Stopes, who, in the face of great difficulties and opposition, pioneered the dissemination of information about family planning for women. In addition, 2008 is also the 90th anniversary of the publication of what was probably the most influential popular book on this subject.

Marie Carmichael Stopes was born in Edinburgh in 1880. Her father was a wealthy architect, who also had an abiding interest in archaeology. Her mother was a Shakespearean scholar and a keen promoter of education for women, in the days when this subject was held in scorn among much of the (male) public.

Marie proved to be a highly intelligent young woman. At University College London she achieved a first class honours BSc in botany (later proceeding to a DSc), and then obtained her PhD at the University of Munich. Her special interest was in the rarified field of plant fossils. In 1904 she joined the Faculty of Science at Manchester University as lecturer, and 3 years later paid a long visit to the Imperial University in Tokyo to study fossil plants.

She returned to Manchester as a lecturer in palaeo-botany and indeed remained an authority on this subject for the rest of her life. In 1911 Stopes married a Canadian botanist, Reginald Gates, in Montreal, but the marriage was annulled 5 years later – she claimed that the marriage was never consummated.

An important event in her life was meeting Margaret Sanger in 1915. Sanger was an American birth control campaigner who had fled to this country from the USA to avoid imprisonment for the heinous crime of disseminating information about contraception. From Sanger Marie learned of the use of the rubber pessary for female contraception.

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Shortly after her marriage annulment Stopes married Humphrey Vernon Roe, a famous aircraft pioneer, then serving in the RAF in World War I and, shortly afterwards, in 1918, she published her first book *Married Love*. For the first time a sensible, matter of fact book was available in the English language on birth control, written for the general public. It created an immediate sensation and became a runaway best seller. The book review in the *Lancet* reads:

'An extremely sensible little book; it deals in the most intimate way with normal sexual life and by sheer frankness remains decent. Of the things commonly accepted as sound physiology we need only say that they are things which thousands of people would be happier for knowing ... the book is really needed as a public advisor.'

Married Love was soon followed by a leaflet *Truth about VD* in 1921 and then by an equally popular book *Radiant Motherhood*.

In 1921, helped by funding from her husband, Stopes opened the 'Mother's Clinic' in the desperately deprived area of Upper Holloway in north London. This was staffed by trained nurses with a female doctor available for women requiring medical examination and advice.

Further Marie Stopes Clinics were opened in large towns around the country – often against considerable local opposition. (The medical profession often objected to the fact that she used the title 'Doctor' when she was not medically qualified. However, she was more than entitled to this prefix, possessing as she did no less than two prestigious scientific doctorates!) The standard advice given in her clinics was that condoms should be used during the early weeks of marriage, followed by the fitting of a rubber pessary of her own design, rather than the larger, rather clumsy, Dutch cap.

It must be remembered that, at the time, many women were entirely ignorant of

family planning and contraception, if used at all, was the domain of the male partner and the condom. Many women were condemned to a life of repeated, often unwanted, pregnancies.

Marie Stopes herself had her first baby in 1919; it was stillborn. However, at the age of 44 years she had a son, her only child.

In later years, she never recovered her 'glory years' of 1918–25, when she became a household name. She became more and more dogmatic in her views and had difficulty in cooperating with other workers in the field of birth control.

In 1957 she was diagnosed with advanced and inoperable breast cancer and she died on 2 October 1958. She is remembered today for the unique part she played in publicizing contraception for women and in making it a subject for open and rational discussion. **BJHM**

Figure 1 is reproduced courtesy of Marie Stopes International.

Conflict of interest: none.

Figure 1. Dr Marie Stopes.

