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THE ANTI-ABORTION CAMPAIGN IN ENGLAND, 1966–1989

Olivia Dee



The Anti-Abortion Campaign in England, 1966–1989

This book comprises a history of the anti-abortion campaign in England, focusing on the period 1966–1989, which saw the highest concentration of anti-abortion activity during the twentieth century. It examines the tactics deployed by campaigners in their efforts to overturn the 1967 Abortion Act. Key themes include the influence of religion on attitudes towards sexuality and pregnancy; representations of women and the female body; and the varied, and often deeply contested, attitudes towards the status of the fetus articulated by both anti-abortion and pro-choice advocates during the years 1966–1989.

Olivia Dee is an oral historian of gender, women and reproductive rights based at Queens University Belfast, on the Northern Ireland Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries project. She completed her PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London in 2017.

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For Evan, Stella, Mum and Dad



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Abbreviations

ALRA	Abortion Law Reform Association
ALDU	Association of Lawyers in Defence of the Unborn
BCC	Birth Control Campaign
BMA	British Medical Association
<i>BMJ</i>	<i>British Medical Journal</i>
BPAS	Birmingham Pregnancy Advisory Service
BPAS	British Pregnancy Advisory Service
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
FPA	Family Planning Association
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationary Office
NAC	National Abortion Campaign
PAS	Pregnancy Advisory Service
SPUC	Society for the Protection of Unborn Children
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement



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Introduction

How can a woman's capacity to be a mother be measured before she has a child? Fecklessness, a bad background, being a bad manager—these are handicaps, but they are nothing to do with love, that indefinable bond, no matter how bad the social conditions, no matter how strange or difficult the circumstance, which links a mother to her child and makes her cherish it.¹

These words, spoken by Labour MP Kevin MacNamara were used to oppose the legalisation of abortion during the Second Reading of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill in July 1966. This speech was an example of the tone of anti-abortion discourse that was to become so prevalent in the years after abortion was legalised by the 1967 Abortion Act. MacNamara's words were representative of the fervent ideology of the anti-abortion movement, which prioritised the protection of the foetus and cherished motherhood. MacNamara articulated traditional ideas about the trajectory of women's lives, including expectations around marriage and reproduction by underlining how, in his opinion, motherhood was an intrinsic part of every woman's psychology and biology. This book examines this campaign in depth for the first time, documenting the creation and expansion of the anti-abortion movement in England; its tactics, rhetoric and motivations. This campaign, still in evidence today, formed in reaction and response to the partial legalisation of abortion, would spend the following decades engaged in the crusade to restrict access and emphasise the dangers of abortion both to individual women and to the moral fabric of England overall.

The period 1966 to 1988 saw the highest concentration of anti-abortion activity during the twentieth century. Based on evidence from original oral history interviews, as well as significant archival research, this book represents the first major history of the English anti-abortion movement and focuses on the period between two turning points: the 1967 Abortion Act and the Alton Bill. The 1967 Abortion Act, which partially legalised abortion in England, was the result of half a century of

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political lobbying by the Abortion Law Reform Association, a pressure group which worked constantly to force the abortion issue into Parliament. In 1988, after over twenty years of pressure from anti-abortion campaigners, David Alton MP brought a bill before the Commons which aimed to restrict access to abortion. Despite significant support from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and LIFE, the two primary anti-abortion groups, the bill failed to progress. Its collapse was perceived as a watershed moment and led to (sometimes bitter) splits and divisions among anti-abortion campaigners. This book examines the tactics deployed by campaigners in their efforts to overturn the 1967 Abortion Act: examining the role and influence of religion, with particular emphasis on Christianity; attitudes towards sexuality and pregnancy; anti-abortion representations of women; and the deeply contested attitudes towards the status of the foetus in both pro-choice and anti-abortion discourse.

The research questions and methodology for this book were designed to analyse the form and development of the anti-abortion movement, as well as illuminate and contribute to the history of women and gender in twentieth-century Britain. In order to address the significant academic and historiographic lacuna on abortion in modern English scholarship, I began with a set of research questions to provide an expansive history of the English anti-abortion movement. Who formed the emerging anti-abortion groups? What tactical decisions did these organisations make within the campaign? Why and how did they pursue particular campaigns? Finally, why did they fail to overturn the partial legalisation of abortion? These questions were integral to this research, since no comprehensive, objective, history of the movement existed to reference. My research presents an alternative to the conceptual and historiographical preoccupation with narratives that emphasise fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood by focusing on anti-abortion discourse around women who chose to disrupt that process. I chose instead to emphasise the parallel narratives of women who refused this role or who, physically and mentally exhausted by it, sought to change their own relationship to motherhood.

The personal commitment and conviction of English anti-abortion activists ensured that writing the history of this movement would likely require a wide range of archival source material, but in order to reconstruct some of the thornier, less public parts of the history, this material had to be accompanied by oral history research. The focus of academic writing has been on the subject of abortion in relation to the pro-choice movement, which fought to secure legal abortion, and then spent decades defending the 1967 Abortion Act against attempts at restrictive reform from anti-abortion MPs and organisations. When the Wellcome Library acquired the full archive of the Abortion Law Reform Association in 1982 and the National Abortion Campaign in 2012, this history was

increasingly navigable, ensuring that it was now possible to examine in minute detail the committee minutes, private correspondence and internal memoranda of such pivotal activists as Madeleine Simms, Diane Munday, Stella Browne and Janet Chance, amongst others. The ALRA collections and related material have been utilised by academic researchers into the abortion reform movement, including historians such as Lesley Hall, who used the collection for her research on Stella Browne, a pro-choice campaigner in the 1930s,² and by Emma Jones, and Anne-Marie Kilday and David S. Nash, who used this material to explore the letters sent to the ALRA by (often desperate) women seeking abortions.³

What is missing from this research is the history of the opposition to these groups who worked so industriously for access to free, legal and safe abortion. These archives are particularly instrumental for this thesis as well, in as much as they provide reflections, tactical strategies and private discussions about the nature of a political enemy. Neither of the two main anti-abortion organisations, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) nor LIFE have formal archives, a factor which underlined the importance of conducting oral histories to be analysed alongside existing archives. SPUC did allow me to examine their collection of related newspaper articles collected from 1966 until present day. This material constituted a thorough record of the mentions of abortion in national news media, and was therefore useful in developing an understanding of how the movement was received, and, in a wider context, the period in which abortion reform became part of the national consciousness. In addition, issues of *Human Concern*, SPUC's newsletter, and *LIFE News*, LIFE's own publication, were crucial to constructing detailed chronologies, and worked well in conjunction with the ample source material for the ALRA and contemporaries.

The term 'pro-life' is more recent than the creation of anti-abortion groups in England. The first instances of usage in English newspapers tend to be after 1973, when abortion became legal in America, and the term 'pro-life' became used more frequently. *The Observer* referenced 'the pro-life lobby' in a letter from Madeleine Simms, a member of the ALRA, in 1976.⁴ In 1977, another letter in *The Guardian* referenced 'pro-life supporters.'⁵ In a *Daily Mail* editorial in 1981, Malcolm Muggeridge referred to a 'pro-life candidate' in a Croydon election⁶ and *The Times* reported a speech by Ronald Reagan in 1986 which discussed 'anti-abortion "pro-life" lobbyists.'⁷ This book utilises primarily the 'anti-abortion' moniker. 'Pro-life' is a more recent term, as just explained, but has connotations with modern discourse that were not as relevant during the time period I have chosen to focus upon. 'Anti-abortion' is a factual representation of its ideology. Again, I use 'pro-choice' because of the movement's own use of that label, and its reflection of the message of the campaign. Where possible, I avoid 'pro-abortion' and 'anti-choice,'

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the traditional names given to the opposite movement by the two sides, and perhaps less reflective of how each group would identify itself.

A Note on Oral History

It is striking, given the chronic paucity of existing evidence, that our understanding of marital contraceptive practices has not been enriched by any systematic oral history. Where previous oral histories have considered such issues, their interest has only been marginal.⁸

In her study on birth control in the early to mid-twentieth century, Kate Fisher discusses the methodological benefits of employing oral history and archival research simultaneously, especially in the case of subject matter where the archival research is less accessible or less likely to deal with the personal:

It is easy to see the benefits of using this method to investigate a subject such as birth control behaviour, where little material on the details and meanings of everyday practices, choices, preferences and beliefs exists in archival sources. Moreover, where individuals do appear in written sources it is frequently in a snapshot of their lives framed by others' concerns at a particular time.⁹

This critique of archival evidence rings true particularly in the case of the anti-abortion movement.¹⁰ A good deal of the available archival material is framed from the perspective of the organisation or individual who collated it, and used it to create a profile of the anti-abortion movement. Absent within this are personal, individual reflections on how these practices were constructed, and why. Fisher was aware that the archival material on her subject was unlikely to explore the individual experiences of sexuality that were not included in the quantitative or qualitative data available. In particular, Fisher emphasised how 'preconceived' notions about contraception and the advice given in marriage manuals were in fact challenged by the oral history research.¹¹ My own methodological decisions were taken to address these particular concerns, and to reflect my belief that the history of the movement itself requires the voices of those who were so committed to ensuring its success. As a researcher, I wanted to understand the motivations and tactical choices made by anti-abortion activists and the reason for their commitment to the movement which fought so tenaciously against legalised abortion.

Oral history and women's history have much in common; both turn the 'camera' of history away from the gaze of traditional historians and to the lives of others. In the same way that the creation of women's history opened up the stories and experience of half of the human race,

oral history projects the voices of those who had not previously been considered, including minorities, women, workers and members of the LGBTQ+ community. It was my belief that, for a project like this to succeed, the oral history component was vital to push past the history in the archives, and understand the stories of the members of the movement who might otherwise be lost. In order to write the history of a movement generated by the tireless work of individual activists, I wanted to use oral history to strengthen the archival material, and allow the members of the movement to share their own narratives.

Notes

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4. Madeleine Simms, 'Letter,' *The Observer*, 31 October 1976, p. 14.
5. Eugene Fraser, 'Letter,' *The Guardian*, 28 February 1977, p. 14.
6. Malcolm Muggeridge, 'The Vision of Life That Wins My Vote,' *Daily Mail*, 15 October 1981, p. 6.
7. Michael Binyon, 'Reagan's Pledge on Abortion,' *The Times*, 24 January 1986, p. 5.
8. Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
9. Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 13.
10. Fisher used her own example, discussing how the lives of individuals and their interaction with birth control could be used to promote 'horror stories' related to traditional birth control methods for the purposes of promoting a new family planning clinic. (Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], p. 13).
11. Fisher argued that despite advice given in marriage manuals and those dedicated to family planning and sex, and despite 'assumptions of demographers and historians,' the belief that women were adopting new birth control methods because of a sense of 'frustration' with more traditional methods like withdrawal was not proved by the extensive oral history research. Fisher found instead that many interviewees, married between the 1920s and 1940s, had 'positive' reasons for continuing with their traditional methods, and were still managing to restrict their families to between one and three children. In addition, she argued that preconceptions about feminism and birth control attributed a position of power and agency to women when it came to contraception, supported by archival evidence that the oral history seemed to discredit. (Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], p. 9).

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Correspondence with Members 197475 (Select Committee)
The Wellcome Library, London
EPH620a Abortion Ephemera
SA/ALR Abortion Law Reform Association 1930s2000s
Madeleine Simms Papers 18611983
SA/FPA Family Planning Association
SA/FPA/C/G/9/1/1 Abortion Campaigns
SA/NAC National Abortion Campaign
SA/NAC/B Campaigns and Events 19751990
SA/NAC/E Related Organisations 19751997
SA/NAC/G Textual Resources 19751985
154SA/NBT National Birthday Trust Fund
SA/NBT/U/7/12 International Pro-Life Information Centre
SA/PAT The Patients Association
SA/PAT/D/1 Abortion
The Womens Library Collection (London School of Economics), London
Box 14/15 Other Campaigns
2SJA/F/8 Records of the St Joans Alliance
Box FL513 Abortion
5SPG Records of the Six Point Group (including the papers of Hazel Hunkins-Hallinan)
5SPF/M/1114 Box FL547 Abortion
5SPF/M/1516 Box FL547 Co-ordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act
Catholic Herald
Crisis Magazine
Daily Mail
Daily Telegraph
Evening Standard
Glasgow Herald
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