



Esther Katz, ed. *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 2, Birth Control Comes of Age, 1928-1939*. Peter C. Engelman and Cathy Moran Hajo, associate editors; Amy Flanders, assistant editor. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 592 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03137-3.

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Published on H-Women (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

### Sorting Truth from Myth: The Letters of Margaret Sanger, 1928-1939

In some circles, the name Margaret Sanger is synonymous with “birth control advocate,” “racist,” or “eugenicist,” just to name a few. She has been either a scapegoat for some in conservative circles or a woman worthy of the upmost respect, whose work championed open access to birth control for all women, especially the poor. For all that has been penned on the famous Sanger, the image of who she really was seems to remain somewhat of an enigma. Esther Katz’s task as the editor of Sanger’s papers has to be an incredible, yet daunting challenge, since Sanger left over 120,000 items, including letters, diaries, and speeches. Volume 2 of *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger* chronicles Sanger’s life from 1928 to 1939 and is the second of four volumes to be published. The book begins with her resignation from the American Birth Control League (ABCL) and concludes during the beginning of WWII with her semiretirement in Arizona. The eight thematic chapters mark Sanger’s personal and professional triumphs and obstacles. Within the letters, we learn about an older Sanger’s attempts to navigate a changing society that began to view birth control differently.

The first chapter begins with Sanger’s letter to Juliet B. Rublee, who resigned following Sanger’s resignation from the ABCL (both remained on the executive board). As Katz explains, Sanger’s resignation was due in part to a change in the ABCL’s leadership as well as its mission. The letters in chapter 1 trace how Sanger continued her work, starting the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control (NCFLBC) just six months after her departure from the ABCL. Within the letters is also Sanger’s quest to oversee the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCCRB). As shown in chapter 2, Sanger faced financial difficulties not only professionally but also personally with the stock market crash of 1929. The fortune of her husband, J. Noah Slee, was lost, which

led to numerous arguments over money. At the same time, the NCFLBC and the BCCRB struggled with the loss of benefactors, but an increase in need by women. Sanger also sought to bring the battle over birth control to the floor of the U.S. Congress, by lobbying for the repeal of the Comstock laws. Chapters 3 and 4 follow Sanger’s lobbying efforts in Washington. The years 1931 to 1934 were extremely difficult for Sanger as she tirelessly worked toward passage of legislation that would allow physicians to consult women about birth control. However, Sanger’s heroic efforts were not enough and bill S. 1842 failed. Sanger and the NCFLBC were devastated, leading Sanger to retreat to Arizona, which marks the beginning of chapter 5. She decided to change course, encouraging the NCFLBC to focus on grassroots initiatives. Nevertheless, the *One Package* case (1936), which ruled that physicians were exempt from federal obscenity laws, gave Sanger the satisfaction that all of her work in Washington was not in vain, given that the courts and not politicians implemented the important change. Chapters 6 through 8 highlight the cultural shifts from that decision. The NCFLBC disbanded, claiming it had accomplished what it set out to do. The American Medical Association approved birth control as a part of medical practice, a stance that Sanger sought for years. The BCCRB consolidated and soon joined the ABCL, forming the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) in 1939. The formation of the BCFA marked an end of Sanger’s formal career. She remained in Arizona, citing health concerns and enjoying semiretirement.

Reviewing a book like this is not easy. What is its purpose? Who is the target audience? For the general public, with very little context given, the letters may be hard to navigate or even understand. However, for teachers, volumes 1 and 2 (and eventually all four volumes) may provide valuable primary material to utilize in the classroom.

Students have a chance to read Sanger's words firsthand without having to travel to examine her papers, which can easily be integrated into a high school history lesson plan or college classroom activity. Although it is not the same as reading her actual letters, students have the opportunity to read her words in the context that they were written and to debate whether or not existing labels are in fact valid.

However, as a scholar, I found that as I read through the letters, I was drawn in as much to Sanger as a wife, mother, and friend as I was to Sanger, the birth control advocate. In my opinion, we, as scholars, periodically forget that our subjects of analysis have a human side. We become so involved in what they said or did regarding a particular social and political issue that we overlook their everyday worries, such as their health or children; we forget that they argued with their spouses or reveled in a visit from a friend. What does it say about Sanger who in the first letter of this volume speaks to

her friend Rublee about their resignation in one line, but in the next line states, "The orange diet was so wonderful that I am on it again" (p. 3)? What does it say about Sanger who fought with her husband over issues of money and had several affairs? Does it detract from her accomplishments or does it provide a more complex side of a woman who instills both hatred and respect? Although not all the letters focused on Sanger's personal life, it is refreshing to note that Katz and her staff were not only interested in projecting a portrait of Sanger the advocate working tirelessly to carve out some authority within a movement she began, but also committed to giving the reader an image of Sanger as a woman, whose friends and family were just as important to her. She struggled to balance both roles and did not always do so successfully. It is this "other" side that gives the bulk of the letters substance and allows readers an opportunity to see that Sanger had human flaws and to also question if there is evidence indicating that those imperfections pushed her to achieve her accomplishments.

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**Citation:** Cheryl K. Lemus. Review of Katz, Esther, ed., *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 2, Birth Control Comes of Age, 1928-1939*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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