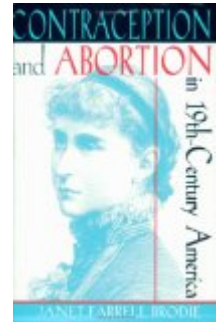


**Janet Brodie.** *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994. xiii + 373 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-8433-9.



**Reviewed by** Richard L. Hughes

**Published on** H-Women (October, 1999)

The contemporary debate over reproductive issues often follows an implicit, if not misleading, historical model which, depending on one's perspective, suggests that recent decades have brought either unprecedented progress for women or the sharp decline of traditional values. Both sides portray issues such as contraception and abortion as new developments in American society. In contrast, historians recognize that contraception and abortion were not invented in the twentieth century. In fact, many historians have long pondered the dramatic decline in the birthrate among white Americans before 1900 and, in the case of Janet F. Brodie, found older explanations which stressed abstinence or medical advances lacking.

In *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America*, Brodie shatters the notion that these issues are new, and instead illustrates that an array of information, methods, and products became available between 1830 and 1870. According to Brodie, abstinence as a recommended strategy elicited as much sarcasm as serious consideration while contraception and abortion were instead in

the "vanguard" of an emerging consumer culture which emerged during the period. (p. 231) Beginning with the advice literature of the 1830s and evolving into a conspicuous "flood" of entrepreneurs and commercial products by 1870, Americans strove, often publicly, for a semblance of reproductive control before the Comstock Laws of the 1870s rendered such activities obscene and criminal.

Brodie's careful examination of such evidence as advice literature, court records, medical journals, personal letters, and speeches aims at an ambitious portrait of the private lives of many Americans during the period. Her most extraordinary contribution is her analysis of a personal diary of Mary Poor, a New York woman, which includes a detailed account of her sexual activity and reproductive cycles from 1841 through the end of the century. More importantly, Brodie is able to compare Poor's public and private lives to reveal the ambivalence many women of the time felt toward a part of life which involved both the "love of motherhood" and the "dread" and fear of pregnancies and childbirth (p. 9).

For Brodie, such strategies as withdrawal, douching, condoms, spermicidal sponges, diaphragms, and abortion-inducing drugs represented an effort, albeit often unsuccessful, by Americans to remove pregnancy and family size from the realm of fate. Advice was often contradictory and products were often flawed, but the effort reveals ordinary individuals striving for "greater self-determination" (p. 86). Of course, even modest gains in preventing, terminating, or limiting the number of pregnancies led to complex results. For example, Brodie points out that while the shift from withdrawal toward vaginal douching in mid-century "gave women a new power over reproduction," it also brought women the "burden of failure" or marital conflict in the case of an unwanted pregnancy (p. 79).

Furthermore, not all women perceived innovation in reproductive control as liberating and, Brodie suggests, the criminalization of contraception and abortion after 1870 stemmed as much from the ambivalence of many women as it did from the "fanaticism" of individuals such as Anthony Comstock (p. 294). Such complexity both challenges popular notions about the history of reproductive control and suggests the agency inherent in the reproductive decisions of the bedroom or pharmacy.

While Brodie leaves little doubt as to the ubiquitous nature of reproductive issues among the white middle class in the nineteenth century, her work raises interesting questions about the importance of other factors. She touches only briefly on the importance of Native Americans or African Americans in shaping reproductive issues in American culture and, perhaps surprisingly for a book centered on the period 1830-1870, gives almost no attention to the role of the Civil War or immigration. The latter may be the most unfortunate omission as many of the individuals Brodie cites as victims of the Comstock prosecution were Eastern European Jews such as Moses Jacobi and Morris Glattsine. When one also considers

Brodie's assertion that much of the opposition to contraception and abortion originated among native-born males, her work suggests that reproductive issues were an integral part of a broader cultural war including such issues as immigration, ethnicity, religion, and economic competition.

More importantly, many readers will also be surprised at the relatively small role of women in Brodie's work. Brodie's numerous vignettes of individuals involved in contraception or abortion includes four men for every woman. As a result, we know much more about the experiences and perspectives of male reformers and opponents such as Edward Foote or Anthony Comstock than the millions of women whose demand for reproductive control drove such public activities. Of course, no historian can be blamed for the scarcity of evidence in a field such as sexuality and reproduction. Nevertheless, Brodie's reliance on the supply of advice and products as well as its fervent opposition leads her to the sometimes explicit and often implicit conclusion that women of the period "remained very much in the background" (p. 135). Such an interpretation robs women of their agency and obscures conflicts over gender roles during the period. Furthermore, it overstates the importance of male public figures and privileges those segments of society capable of speaking loudest. Brodie is correct. Contraception and abortion were "neither all that rare or all that tabooed" during the mid nineteenth century (p. ix). Ultimately, this was the case because the story of reproductive control begins, as does Brodie's work, with the quiet voices and private experiences of anonymous women such as Mary Poor.

Copyright(c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact [h-net@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-net@h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Richard L. Hughes. Review of Brodie, Janet. *Contraception and Abortion in 19th-Century America*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3466>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.