

## MEDICINE

# Sex and freedom

W. F. Bynum applauds the life of a great educator who fought for parental choice.

Campaigner and educator Margaret Sanger was passionate: about life, her cause — the right of women to limit the size of their family — and her many lovers. She lived her long life in the fast lane, dying in 1966 aged 87. Historian Jean Baker's account gives all that verve its due.

Sanger's rise to international prominence came against the odds. Born to a large Irish Catholic working-class family in upstate New York, she had neither educational nor cultural advantages. Her mother died of tuberculosis, and Sanger, too, had the disease, although apparently in her tonsils, not her lungs. Medical school was beyond her means, so she trained as a nurse but never completed the course. Neither of her two marriages was conventional: she hated domesticity and was frequently away from home. Her three children were often cared for by others, although she did return home to hold her dying daughter.

Sanger devoted her life to the cause for which she is still remembered by many, and vilified by some: birth control. She grew up knowing at first hand what the rigours of frequent childbearing with little income took out of women, and saw many more examples in her brief career as a district nurse in New York City before the First World War.

She and her first husband, architect William Sanger, moved in bohemian, socialist and even anarchist circles. Women's right to vote was the most pressing issue among feminists of the time, although many of Sanger's radical friends set suffragist struggles within the larger social and political context. In her world view, all these movements paled before the central one: the liberation that separating sexuality from reproduction could give to women in particular, and society in general.

Sanger faced

formidable problems. Contraception was not only taboo, it was illegal. Under-the-counter methods — foams, caps, pessaries and douches — were unreliable and cumbersome, although more effective than nothing. The condom, which was much improved during Sanger's early career, was officially used only to prevent venereal disease. Abstinence was hardly an easy option, and the 'rhythm method', which Sanger distrusted, was hit-and-miss. Knowledge of the female reproductive cycle was still rudimentary.

Despite these difficulties, Sanger believed that women deserved help in limiting their family sizes. From a small campaign to open a clinic to the international organizations that she helped to create, the legality and availability of birth control were her abiding passions. This brought her into confrontation with the law (including time in jail), the Catholic Church and politicians. She also had frequent contact with physicians, and the peculiarities of US society in the early twentieth century meant that she needed them to run her clinics.

Physicians were exempted from some of the strictures of the punitive Comstock laws, named after Anthony Comstock (1844–1915), an ardent puritan who persuaded Congress to pass draconian prohibitions on all manner of things that he deemed obscene. Comstock clashed with Sanger and many others over contraceptive devices, which fell within his remit as a postal inspector; it was an offence to send anything obscene through the postal service. Comstock went on to inspire the youthful J. Edgar



**Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion**  
JEAN H. BAKER  
Hill & Wang: 2011.  
368 pp. \$35

Hoover, ensuring that the FBI continued the vigilance. So the gaps in the Comstock laws, and Sanger's own pragmatic attitude to her cause, meant that birth control was medicalized almost from the beginning.

Baker elegantly recounts Sanger's single-minded pursuit of her obsession. Her account reminds us that there has long been a litigious element in US society. Substitute birth control with the terms stem-cell research or abortion, and a lot of what Baker says is uncomfortably topical. To her credit, she never preaches, even if her own modernist liberal stance is clear. Instead, she reveals a portrait of a complex woman whose heart was in the right place.

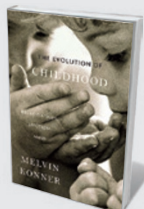
By sheer dint of will, Sanger became a woman of international standing and an inspiration to both sexes. Her vision of birth control became mixed with eugenic concerns — common among many reformers of her period — but she never lost her abiding concern for the plight of individual women.

One could write a psychobiography of Margaret Sanger. She was often called a hysteric; her granddaughter described her as a nymphomaniac. Her love life, involving the writer H. G. Wells and several of her lawyers and assistants, was colourful and crowded. Yet such a portrait would miss the point of Sanger's achievement, and Baker is wise to rely on the evidence to reveal her subject.

Sanger had an attractive personality and many friends. This was fortunate: she needed the rich to support her and her cause. Among her many rich allies was Katharine McCormick, a biology graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, whose husband had a serious mental disorder, probably schizophrenia. McCormick devoted much of their fortune to medical research, and it was her friendship with Sanger that led McCormick to support the work of biologist Gregory Pincus and gynaecologist John Rock on hormones that prevent ovulation. Sanger thus lived to see what she had long wished for, an effective contraceptive: the pill.

Population control still comes too low in global initiatives. Sanger's career reminds us that many of the world's problems originate because there are simply too many of us. ■

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## The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind

Melvin Konner (Harvard Univ. Press, 2011; \$22.50)  
Anthropologist Melvin Konner reveals how our childhood affects who we are individually and as a species. Morten Kringelbach described Konner as "an excellent tour guide to the sacred lands of childhood" (*Nature* **467**, 918–919; 2010).



## Evolution: The First Four Billion Years

Edited by Michael Ruse and Joseph Travis (Harvard Univ. Press, 2011; \$24.95)

This authoritative introduction to evolutionary biology delves into the history and controversies of the field. It includes an encyclopaedic section covering key figures and topics — from Aristotle and altruism to E. O. Wilson and sociobiology.