

The Background of the Movement

10



In the library Margaret began her task like a genealogist tracking down ancestors, although she was looking for spiritual forebears. It had been easy to recognize her kinship with the Drysdales, now she wanted to find the roots of her family tree. Who had first challenged the rights of church and state to force people to multiply with no curbs on their fertility?

Even before she began her studies, Margaret realized that throughout most of man's existence, survival had been the problem, and that required the proliferation of vast numbers of expendables. And yet, as Margaret found, from the very dawn of history there was evidence that man had tried to limit his own fertility. Whenever there were too many mouths to feed, infanticide had been the answer. This practice had continued right into modern times, not only among primitive peoples, but in the case of girl babies, throughout the sophisticated Orient, as well as illegally in every land. As a means of race improvement, Plato and Aristotle had endorsed it. They had also suggested it for family limitation, to be used under a council of elders to insure a proper balance between the state's population and its food supply.

But as far back as one can go, there had also been experiments in the prevention of birth. Four thousand years ago, among the first medical reports, the Chinese included instructions for abortion. A thousand years later the Egyptian Petri Papyrus gave advice for suppositories made of honey and alligator's dung, which may have been as effective as the "antiseptic pastes" sold in later

times The Hebrews, Hindus, and Persians all left prescriptions for suppositories, some using alum or olive oil

Yet for all the urgency in helping special cases of privileged ladies, few, except the Greek philosophers, had worried about the overall birth rate until the great upsurge in population following the Industrial Revolution This expansive age inspired wide ranging speculation, much of it too sanguine, which in turn started a reaction Enthusiasts of the early phase of the French Revolution believed that people's governments, with the help of modern machinery to create material abundance, would not only end poverty, ignorance, and disease, but raise up ideal societies

To Thomas R Malthus, English pastor and later professor of history and political science, this was utopian nonsense When his own father argued that way at the breakfast table, his son was goaded into rebuttal He claimed that the chief cause of human strife and misery was man's constant tendency to increase beyond his means of subsistence Malthus built his thesis on wide reading, including evidence presented three decades earlier by Benjamin Franklin in his *Notes* on the then British Colonies

Franklin had observed that the population of his country had doubled in twenty-five years He had also predicted that for some time it would go on doubling every quarter of a century The cause of this growth was the New World's vast, unpeopled land, which encouraged early marriage and large families, averaging eight children As Dr Franklin saw it, the chief restraint on the spread of any species, plant or animal, was overcrowding In the Old World, mutual interference on a limited food supply had kept the population stable Without such interference, any species would proliferate until it finally covered the earth These points from Dr Franklin helped trigger the ideological bomb which Malthus exploded in 1792

For Margaret Sanger, Malthus was only a name when she began to read at the British Museum, but the name to which all references led She studied the famous *Essay on Population*, and then secured her own copy to keep on hand for her life work She was amazed, however, to find nothing about the problem which had launched

her own career. Nowhere did the author so much as hint that women had a special stake in his subject.

With lofty scholarship Professor Malthus set forth his postulates: (1) Food is necessary to the existence of man. (2) The passion of the sexes is necessary and will remain in its present state. (3) The power of population is infinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence because population, if unchecked, increases in geometric ratio, e.g., 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc., while subsistence increases only in arithmetic ratio, e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc. In other words, the seeds of life are profuse, while the room to raise food is restricted. Under this curb all species, fauna as well as flora, shrink, as must the race of man. Nature keeps a last dreadful resource to enforce its law, famine. But man himself helps maintain the balance through his vices, which constantly reduce the population. Therefore political reforms to end poverty and disease would merely increase the numbers and hasten famine.

As a cleric, Malthus recognized only one way to check nature's harsh laws. Man alone of all species is endowed with reason and a conscience. If he chooses, he can restrain his sexual passion. A policy of late marriage and abstinence could control the birth rate.

To the nurse who had worked in New York's tenements, this solution was as utopian as the instant reform plans at which Malthus had scoffed. Because his contemporaries were also skeptical, some of them groped for alternatives, but the most practical suggestion had been made ever before Malthus published his essay.

Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, had thrown out a curious observation when he wrote on *The Situation and Relief of the Poor*. He said that French women relied on a sponge to stop conception. Thirty years later the benign old bachelor again referred to the sponge, this time in writing to the man who is today called the father of family limitation.

Francis Place was a master tailor of Charing Cross, London, when he received Bentham's letter. He had become not only prosperous but well read through self-imposed exertion and a small library. Slowly, painfully, he had lifted himself out of poverty and squalor. Married at the age of nineteen, he had at once begun to

sire the first of his fifteen children, five of whom he buried as infants. He seemed the archetype of all the sexual recklessness that Malthus had condemned and he might have remained just that, had it not been for his wife. For all her burdens, it was she, he insisted, who had inspired him to rise in the world through intellectual effort.

As though to atone for his own concupiscence, he gave much of his later life to family limitation. Like the American nurse who read about him a hundred years later, he, alone of those concerned, was motivated by personal experience. Since to him the problem was not an abstraction, he launched an activist campaign.

Convinced by his own failure that Malthus's hope of moral restraint would never succeed, Francis Place called attention to realistic remedies. As he saw it, the task was not to preach to the poor, but to teach them how to avoid excess children. He advised them to follow their better nature by marrying early and remaining chaste, but at the same time to limit their families in "hygienic ways."

He explained all this in a broadside to *Married Working People*, currently known as the "diabolical handbill." For the use of the poor, and for the first time in history, Francis Place listed three types of contraception: (1) withdrawal, known from Biblical times as "coitus interruptus" and later called "male prudence"; (2) the sheath for the male, made of sheer cloth or animal guts; (3) a sponge, tampon, douche and suppositories for the female.

Aware of the risks in his undertaking, he printed the handbills anonymously and had them placed in bundles under market stalls to use for likely customers as wrappers for candles and other merchandise. In some places the leaflets were passed out at factory gates or among crowds of workers. One of those who did the passing and got caught was Bentham's foremost protégé, seventeen-year-old John Stuart Mill, who was readied for the task by two gruesome experiences in one fateful hour.

Strolling through St. James's Park one morning, young Mill had come upon a bundle, half-hidden under a tree. He prodded the wrapping until he recognized a blue-faced, strangled, newborn baby. Still shaken by the sight when he passed Old Bailey prison, he faced

a group of freshly hanged prisoners, dangling grotesquely by the neck

Shortly afterward, meeting Francis Place, he blurted out what he had seen. The older man then explained to him the tragedy of unwanted children and their train of misery and vice. Place also confided his own project for reform. Soon young Mill and a friend were hurrying about London with the tracts. They were especially eager to help those most needing help, young married women. But the boys were arrested and spent at least one night in jail on the soon to become familiar charge of distributing obscene literature. In later years, the philosopher economist wrote cautiously about population pressures, but his activist career had closed the day after it began.

Closely in touch with the Bentham-Place circle was Robert Owen, the venturesome Scottish industrial reformer who founded a cooperative colony at New Harmony, Indiana. Owen began with the highest hopes, but not much staying power. When he left his dreary and primitive Utopia, his son, Robert Dale, took over and tried to carry on his father's ideas, which included curbing human fertility. He wrote an essay, *Moral Philosophy*, expounding the reasons for and the nature of the known methods of contraception. This was the first American book to touch the subject, and it inspired a second, whose impact was historic and international.

A copy of Owen's book came into the hands of Dr. Charles Knowlton of Taunton, Massachusetts, a graduate of Dartmouth Medical College. As a physician, his practice had brought him in touch with many women who needed contraception, but he had never heard of it. By himself, he quietly made a few experiments which convinced him that a douche with some chemical base was a preventive. His preference was for alum, a favorite among the ancients. After reading Owen's book, Knowlton wrote his own from the medical standpoint. In 1832 he published it anonymously under the discreet title, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, relying, as had Owen, on a lofty title to shield the subject, only the subtitle, *The Private Companion of Young Married People*, suggested something more

Since the book was written by a doctor in a temperate style, it was for many decades the most impressive work in its field. To this day there are no better answers than Knowlton's to such perennial charges as that family limitation is an unnatural act. To this he readily agreed. It is as unnatural as cutting one's hair or fingernails or shaving. Civilization is a constant war against nature. "The high prerogative of man consists in his power to counteract or to control nature."

Although writing in Puritan Massachusetts, Dr. Knowlton did not share Malthus's views on abstinence, for he saw no virtue in thwarting the normal sex instinct. Instead, he advised married couples to enjoy their pleasures, but using proper safeguards, which he forthwith explained.

Unfortunately Massachusetts was still Puritan. When the authorities tracked down the author of this "lewd" book, they arrested him and after due process of law, sentenced Dr. Knowlton to three months at hard labor. This savage punishment served its purpose. No other doctors risked their careers to tell mothers about contraception, even in cases where another birth might be fatal.

In England, Dr. Knowlton's book continued to sell for forty years, after which it again became a cause célèbre. Hoping to profit from a new concern in the subject, a printer brought out another edition of *Fruits of Philosophy* in the eighteen-seventies, this time with charts and illustrations. Perhaps the graphic aids brought the change of tactics, for the police arrested the printer and persuaded him to plead guilty to the obscenity charges in exchange for a suspended sentence. This satisfied the printer, but not the Malthusian League, recently founded by the Drysdale family of doctors.

In a direct test of the legitimacy of the cause of fertility control, Annie Besant, famous later as a theosophist lecturer, joined with a publisher, Charles Bradlaugh, in bringing out still another edition of the American book. They too were arrested and, in conducting their own defense, became the talk of London. At her trial, Annie Besant declared that she was not the defendant, but the counsel for the poor. "I find my clients amongst the mothers worn-out

with over-frequent child-bearing mothers who beg me to persist in the course on which I am entered”

Nevertheless, they were both sentenced to six months in jail. By appealing their sentences, they achieved their purpose. The Upper Court dismissed the case on a technicality. This decision rendered in 1876 settled for all time in England that contraception was not an obscenity.

To Margaret Sanger, studying in the British Museum, most of this history was news. She had searched the American libraries from Washington to Boston, where the *Fruits of Philosophy* was first published, but she had found no mention of it. She had to cross the ocean to learn the part played by her fellow countryman, Dr Knowlton, in the genesis of what had become her struggle. Beyond that, she had found in the Bradlaugh-Besant precedent the strategy on which she would build her movement. She too would rely on the higher courts.

In her studies Margaret had gained a second curious insight which would help her in New York. She had found that the best known article of contraception had always been immune from attack. Back in the eighteenth century, an English Colonel Cundom had developed and advertised without molestation, a sheath made from sheep guts. The condom, as it became known, was apparently legal because its purpose was to protect the male from venereal disease and not to protect the female from conception.

Margaret had established her spiritual forebears and found useful precedents, but that was only a fraction of what she learned that year. Havelock Ellis broadened her vision of the potentials of birth control not only as a means for protecting mothers, but as the key to race improvement and the adjustment of population to world resources. From henceforth her emotional commitment was reinforced by a vast fund of exact information in related fields.