1 Access to Contraception and Family Planning Information in Ireland from the 1920s to the 1950s

In a letter to British birth control campaigner, Marie Stopes in February 1923, a 28-year-old woman from Limerick wrote:

> I have read for the first time off the paper about your good work and your book about birth control. I am just twenty eight years old married nine years today and the mother of six children so I feel I have done my bit and only wish I could be in London to go to your clinic. I am too poor to afford a maid and have to (sic) all my own sewing washing and scrubbing and the thought of having any more children would drive me mad. Wishing you all success and hoping I may get your book.

On the top of the letter the woman wrote 'Please accept my apology for my impertinence in asking for a book or how I may obtain one but I really feel it's a Godsend to people like us and shall always be grateful'.[1] This Irish woman, like many who wrote in desperation to Marie Stopes in the 1920s and 1930s, (and many who did not), was subject to Ireland's laws relating to sexual morality. For much of the twentieth century, it was difficult for Irish men and women to obtain information on birth control, including publications by Marie Stopes, as a result of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. As mentioned in the introduction, under this act, there was a wide interpretation of what constituted 'indecent and obscene'. In 1931, Marie Stopes wrote to two members of the Irish censorship board, William B. Joyce and P.J. Keawell to complain that her book *Radiant Motherhood*, which had been written 'to give specific help to pregnant women, rules of health for the nine months of their pregnancy, in order that they may bring to birth healthy and happy children' had been unfairly banned on 'the ground of "advocating unnatural methods of contraception"'. No reply to her letter exists in the archive so we do not know Joyce's response, however, Keawell replied to state that it was not usual practice to enter into correspondence with authors but that he would bring her letter

[1] Letters to Marie Stopes concerning *Married Love* [Wellcome Collection (WC), PP/MCS/A/182].

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to the meeting of the next board.[2] Nevertheless, Stopes' request appears to have had no effect. A 1936 list of books prohibited in the Irish Free State included all of her publications.[3]

In the early decades of post-independent Ireland, perceived threats to the Irish family were othered as foreign influences. George L. Mosse's work on nationalism, sexuality, and respectability in twentieth-century Europe is pertinent here; in linking racism and sexuality, he has argued that 'sexuality was not just one more attribute of the racist stereotype, but by its attack upon respectability threatened the very foundations of bourgeois society'.[4] For instance, Cara Delay and Annika Liger have shown how abortionists in post-independent Ireland were perceived to be 'a corrupting and possibly contagious force, harming Irish women and Irish society and threatening the very fabric of the nation in a key post-colonial moment'.[5] Similarly, in debates around the Censorship Act, as Senia Pašeta has shown, 'anti-birth control propaganda became increasingly entwined with anti-Protestantism'.[6] More broadly, and as outlined in the introduction, concerns about sexual morality were expressed in other legislative initiatives around censorship, restrictions on dance halls, as well as the efforts of the Church hierarchy through Lenten pastorals, and voluntary efforts to eradicate sex work by religious groups such as the Legion of Mary.[7]

However, in spite of the legislative ban, we know that individuals found ways to access contraception. Andrea Tone's pioneering work on the black market for contraceptives in the United States in the late nineteenth century has highlighted the value in exploring illegal trades in contraception, in particular showing how such a study can 'call into question assumptions of draconian enforcement of birth control restrictions and tell us new things about law, commerce and everyday sexual practice'.[8] Similarly, as I will show through the evidence of newspaper

[2] [WC, PP/MCS/A/147].
[3] *Books Prohibited in the Irish Free State under the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929 (as on 30 April 1936)* (Dublin: Eason & Son Ltd., 1936).
[4] George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), p. 151.
[5] Cara Delay and Annika Liger, 'Bad mothers and dirty lousers: Representing abortionists in postindependence Ireland', *Journal of Social History*, 54:1, (Fall 2020), pp. 286–305, on p. 300.
[6] Pašeta, 'Censorship and Its Critics', pp. 211–212. [7] Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 102.
[8] Andrea Tone, 'Black market birth control: Contraceptive entrepreneurship and criminality in the Gilded Age', *The Journal of American History*, 87:2, (September 2000), pp. 435–59, on p. 437. See also: Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (Hill and Wang, 2002).

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accounts of court cases, Ireland also had a flourishing black market for contraceptives in the early decades of the twentieth century.

As outlined in the introduction, it is men and women's everyday experiences which are at the heart of this study. As a result of recent scholarship by Cara Delay, Elaine Farrell, and Cliona Rattigan on illegal abortion and infanticide, we know the impact that legal and moral restrictions had on individuals' reproductive health choices in early twentieth-century Ireland.[9] Beginning with recollections from oral history respondents about their parents' experiences and building on this work, this chapter seeks to highlight the profound influence of the legal context on individuals' choices around family planning in the early twentieth century. As a result of the legal barriers and effects of religious and moral condemnation, it was difficult for Irish men and women to access contraception. Individuals' accounts suggest that their parents lacked knowledge of contraception and complied with Church teachings. Yet, the documentation of court cases relating to contraception in the Irish press, and letters from Irish men and women to Marie Stopes complicates this picture and suggests a tension between what oral history interviewees think about their parents' reproductive health experiences and the lived realities of men and women of fertile age in early post-independent Ireland. This chapter provides clear evidence of resistance and attempts at resistance. In addition, the letters from Irish men and women to Marie Stopes and published accounts in Stopes' newspaper *Birth Control News*, suggest that many Irish men and women perceived a lack of access to birth control as having a negative impact on both maternal and infant health, and that this was what motivated their desire for access to effective contraception.

1.1 Oral Histories

As outlined in the introduction, the oral histories conducted as part of this project were primarily with men and women born before 1955. As such, it is difficult to trace the experiences of individuals in the previous generations and we lack personal accounts of family planning from the early twentieth century. One of the few studies to address family limitation was Alexander Humphrey's 1966 book *New Dubliners* which explored the impact of urbanisation on the family. Humphreys conducted interviews with eleven couples from the artisan class in Dublin

[9] On abortion in Ireland, see Cara Delay, 'Pills, potions, and purgatives' and 'Kitchens and kettles' On infanticide see: Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do*? On infanticide in the nineteenth century see: Farrell, *A Most Diabolical Deed*.

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and his book detailed some of these individuals' attitudes to sex. One 'typical' couple was the Dunns who had married in 1923, both at the age of 29, and had six children. According to Humphreys:

> Despite this positive orientation towards having children, Joan and John entered marriage with a rather remarkable ignorance of the sexual and birth processes. Neither of them had received instructions in these matters from their parents, nor did they seek such instructions from a physician prior to their marriage. They had to make shift with the haphazard knowledge of marriage which they picked up from their contemporaries at work.[10]

Moreover, Humphreys noted that 'one cannot escape the strong impression that towards sex John and Joan have a sense of danger and even evil' and reflected on their embarrassment around the issue.[11] Humphreys wrote that in general among the eleven couples he interviewed, there was a complete ignorance of sexual matters on marriage as a result of a lack of parental instruction. One woman interviewed by Humphreys for instance stated:

> I think that it was really sinful that I was allowed to marry as ignorant and as innocent as I was about the whole matter. At that time the only way you learned was from with girls you worked with, but I did not work in a factory and I knew nothing. Honestly, I could surprise you with what I did not know. I used to think of marriage as a mere matter of companionship. It never occurred to me that children or the purpose of marriage had anything to do with sex.[12]

Aside from rare accounts such as these, we lack personal testimonies of family planning from men and women of fertile age in the early twentieth century in Ireland. Yet, oral history has the potential to offer a window into individuals' lived realities and can also provide insights into common perceptions surrounding the experiences of previous generations. In some of the oral history interviews conducted for this project, respondents reflected on their parents' experiences and how these differed or were similar to theirs. These reflections provide some insights into the experiences of older generations but also illustrate the persistence of silences, obstetric trauma, shame, and lack of reproductive choices, well into the twentieth century. Respondents also tended to characterise their parents as being devout in their adherence to Church teachings and passive in relation to issues of sexuality and family planning, which arguably hints at a type of collective or popular memory in relation to the experiences of older generations.[13] Yet,

[10] Alexander J Humphreys, *New Dubliners: Urbanization and the Irish Family* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1966), p. 120.
[11] *Ibid.* [12] *Ibid.*, pp. 138–40.
[13] For more on collective and popular memory, see Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 95–9.

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continuities were also acknowledged. While many interviewees recognised differences in standards of living, schooling and opportunities compared to their parents' generation, it is evident that their contraceptive choices, or lack of, were similar to their parents.

Mothers' experiences were often referred to by female respondents and offered a way for them to situate their own life experiences. Martina (b.1955) stated:

> But then I look back at my mother's life and that was worse than what mine was. She was with the same man all her life and that was just as bad or worse because … I don't know, there were no opportunities for her, do you know what I mean? Compared to how it was, I mean, I feel, my life.

In Martina's view, women of her mother's generation 'were restrained mentally and spiritually. And physically a lot of the time. So, they didn't have … They had no choices at all.' Likewise, Clare (b.1936) from the rural west felt that in contrast to her mother, 'I suppose I had a career, I had a job. My mother didn't.' Noreen (b.1954) felt that women's work in the home was undervalued. She stated: 'they were very crucial in society but very little value left on them, you know?' Similarly, Sally (b.1956) told me: 'I can see that my mother was trapped with children. Had four of us. And the eldest being four going on five and the youngest a couple of months'.

Lily (b.1946) from the rural north felt that women's lives were dictated by a lack of choice around sexual and reproductive health matters. She explained: 'Yeah, I'd say our mothers just laid back and had sex and got pregnant, and laid back and had sex and got pregnant, you know, the size of the families? It obviously was that way, you know. And the men just went on regardless. They had no real input into it all, you know.' Carol (b.1954) felt that her mother, who had been born in 1916, 'certainly wouldn't have had any control over, over contraception or anything like that. Or wouldn't really have understood it, I think to be honest'. Mary Ellen (b.1944) from the rural west of Ireland stated:

> I think they just had children. They didn't understand it at all, sexuality. Maybe I'm wrong but I feel they knew very little about it. And they had their children. My mother had four children but other families had lots more. Lots more. Maybe my mother's age with … I don't know, I think she was in her 30s, well into her 30s when she married, maybe I'm wrong, but I just think it wasn't discussed. And those children kept appearing after 9 or 10 months. And the family kept … it was the norm. But I think way back … I think it was just sex to the female. More a male thing. I really don't know but … they didn't ... it wasn't discussed. And it was just when two parties got together that was it. And oftentimes I don't think they understood how the female anatomy worked.

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These testimonies suggest that many of the female respondents viewed their mothers as having little agency in the areas of family planning and sex. There was a sense among interviewees that women of previous generations had limited knowledge of sex and birth control and that they played a passive role in these matters. Yet, although respondents in general were unclear about whether their parents used family planning methods, some recalled their mothers discussing the use of the rhythm method or safe period. Maria (b.1957), for instance, explained that her mother:

> used to say that the rhythm, 'cause she would've used rhythm, seven children, rhythm, she would say rhythm was a feast or a famine.

Similarly, Judith (b.1950) from Dublin found out through her aunt that her mother had used the safe period:

> And I never asked, but I remember, again one of my aunts telling me. There was three of us with four years between us. That she was supposed to have practised the safe method. And where she heard about that, I don't know.

Although the rhythm method was not a reliable form of family planning, it is clear that some women, such as Maria and Judith's mothers, were actively trying to restrict their families. And, as this chapter will show later on, they were not exceptional.

Trauma and silences around reproductive health experiences were common for the earlier generations. Nellie (b.1944) for example, recalled her mother's traumatic experience of childbirth:

> I suppose I was very precious, because my mother and father were 10 years married before they had any child. And she probably had surgery, but she never talked about it. Which, she got pregnant anyway, and she had a child. The child was born here at home, and she nearly died herself. The child died. The child was a forcep delivery. Terrible. Terrible, terrible. And painful. It wasn't talked about. And they were waiting so long to have to take the child and bury it, was a tragedy really.

Helena's (b.1945) mother had fifteen children. Helena recalled her mother 'She used to joke it was her holiday, going to the [name of local maternity] hospital every year was a holiday'. Helena's mother also had seven miscarriages, one of which Helena witnessed:

> Yeah, I can remember her one time being taken downstairs, and I'm sitting on a chair, and it's soaking with blood. And I remember trying to wash the blood out of the towels the following morning, and I couldn't get it out, yeah.

Her mother's trauma had a significant impact on Helena too. Helena recalled each time her mother became pregnant that 'you didn't know

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whether she was gonna die or not, yeah'. She recalled on one occasion 'realising that she was pregnant again. (laughs) I went around to every church in the town. There were seven churches in the town, praying that she'd have a safe delivery. I- I can remember that fear.'

Similarly, Mairead (b.1953) who grew up in Dublin recalled her mother's experiences as an adoptee and the impact of silence in relation to information about her birth parents. She said:

> She was actually adopted. And she thinks she was adopted by her aunt, but they would never actually tell her in those days, you know. [..] It's funny in those days people wouldn't, it was so a no-no to have a child out of wedlock, you know. I get emotional still, you know.

Mairead became tearful when recalling her mother's experiences, highlighting how such traumas can impact the next generation.

Many of the oral history respondents were also keen to stress the influence that the Catholic Church had on their parents' lives. Áine's (b.1949) mother, for example, had eight children. She reflected on how following the teachings of the Church on birth control had impacted on her parents' lives:

> It was just, it was horrible and she was led and said by them whereas my dad wasn't. He wanted to use birth control, whatever, you know. Anyhow as we often said to him, 'You wouldn't give any of us back now would you Dad?', but anyhow. So, it wasn't the life that she would have wanted, and she really had a tough life you know, because she was a free spirit like myself, you know.

Lizzie (b.1946) from the rural west of Ireland recalled her mother's experience at losing a baby. She explained:

> Now, as I said, for instance they were controlled by their religion and superstition really in a way because we had seven girls and a boy was born that died and that boy, my mother never saw him, you know that, she never, never saw him because at that time they never brought a dead baby back to the mother. And at that time they didn't, as well, they didn't bury them in the cemetery and they had no blessing, no nothing. Absolutely nothing.

As Lizzie explained, at that time, an unbaptised baby could not be buried in a Catholic Church graveyard. Children's burial grounds, or *cilliní*, were used as the resting places for unbaptised or stillborn children who the Church considered unsuitable for burial in consecrated ground.[14] Lizzie's father

[14] See: Eileen M. Murphy, 'Children's burial grounds in Ireland (Cilliní) and parental emotions toward infant death', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 15:3 (September 2011), pp. 409–28.

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went up, fair dues to him, in the night with another man and he buried it in the new graveyard. He buried his child in the graveyard and he told the canon at the time that he wouldn't touch it, that was his property.

Lizzie acknowledged that her father, a chemist, was 'educated and looked up to in the town so he could get away with it.' Nevertheless, this was a powerful act of resistance. The loss of this child had a significant impact on Lizzie's mother, one which she could never speak about. Lizzie's mother's silence around the death of her child illustrates the impact that this had on her, and in Lizzie's view, the Church's rules in relation to the burial of unbaptised children exacerbated the trauma.

Catholic Church teachings, in the view of oral history respondents, also helped to shape their parents' attitudes towards sex and birth control. Mark (b.1952) from a town in the south-east of the country, recalled his mother's attitudes after reading in the newspaper about a woman who died after complications from being on the pill. He recalled that 'she said "That's God's will, that shouldn't be what people are doing" and my mother is a wonderful person and very Christian but she bought all this bullshit, hook, line and sinker, you know.' Ellen (b.1949) felt that her mother

was very strict, very religious, yeah. And she said the only way you don't have children is don't have sex. That's it. And it did happen, because I know another woman, now she would have been a bit older than me all right. And I know that she got married, and she had two children, and then she moved into the spare room because she didn't want any more children. That was the end of that, that was her contraception. Which wasn't great, but, yeah it was like that.

Daithi (b.1950) felt that his 'family were clearly influenced by religion. I'd say my father and mother were almost anti-contraception. I would say they didn't have access to it at all. You know? And, and therefore, had 11 kids'. Rosie (b.1938) from the rural Midlands felt that for her parents, family planning 'just didn't exist and it wouldn't be discussed either. They'd be always against abortion, they'd always be against family planning because the Church said it wasn't right.' Yet, other interviewees recalled their parents having more progressive views. When Colette (b.1946) told her mother (b.1904) that she was expecting her third child, she could 'see her mouth tightening. She was saying "I thought nowadays…". You know, my mother was all in favour'. Colette recalled her mother on another occasion stating, "I can't understand what business it is of any priest or any bishop or having been … what goes on between a couple behind a closed bedroom door."

An analysis of individuals' accounts of their parents' experiences of and attitudes towards family planning suggests that many respondents

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viewed their parents as passive and lacking knowledge in this area. The general consensus was that men and women of fertile age in the early decades of the twentieth century simply adhered to Church teachings. However, it is clear from some of the accounts that some individuals were actively taking steps of resistance, such as through the use of the rhythm method in the case of Maria and Judith's mothers, or by rejection of societal norms in relation to the burial of unbaptised children, in the case of Lizzie's father. Mothers' trauma could, as Mairead and Helena's accounts show, have a distressing impact on their children. Moreover, there were evidently silences around issues such as family planning and sexuality which could suggest a reluctance from parents to discuss these issues with their children, but also perhaps illustrate that for survivors of trauma, 'the ability to speak is blocked completely'.[15]

1.2 'A Dangerous and Nefarious Trade'

Given the archival silences around family planning in the early twentieth century, newspaper accounts can provide evidence of how individuals may have obtained access to contraception. In the period prior to criminalisation, there is evidence to suggest that, as in other countries, there was a bustling trade in contraceptives in Ireland. In 1925, an article in radical Irish newspaper *Honesty* explained:

> What are known as 'rubber goods' can also be had without difficulty, the only difference between Dublin and English cities in this respect is that here they are not publicly exposed for sale in attractive shop windows; but, nevertheless, the 'business' is proceeding and developing.[16]

According to Diarmaid Ferriter, further information emerged about the black market for contraceptives when there was debate about repealing the CLAA during the late 1960s and early 1970s.[17] For example, Keith Joseph Adams from Dublin wrote to the Taoiseach Jack Lynch in 1972 to provide information about his knowledge of the period from 1929 to the phasing out of contraceptives. Adams had worked as an assembler in the sundries department of a pharmaceutical wholesale company called May Roberts which dealt with medical goods.[18] Adams and his colleague

[15] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 184.
[16] 'Dublin's moral plague spots', *Honesty*, 28 February 1925, p. 9.
[17] Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 194.
[18] Letter to Taoiseach Jack Lynch from Keith Joseph Adams, 29 August 1972. [NAI, 2003/16/453]. This case is also discussed in Mary E. Daly, 'Marriage, fertility and women's lives in twentieth-century Ireland (c. 1900–c. 1970)', *Women's History Review*, 15:4, (2006), pp. 571–85, on p. 574 and Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 194.

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T. Farquaharson had responsibility for the stock which consisted of items such as thermometers, finger stalls, trusses, sponges, and dressings. Revealingly, Adams wrote that he and Farquaharson had:

> sole charge of a press with a yale lock, no body not even the Manager or Director had entry to this press. The reason: it was stocked with cigarettes, confections and razors and blades, also carried a stock consisting of 2 gross rubber preventives and we were responsible for the stock.

Adams explained that he and Farquahrson supplied 'about four or five chemists occasionally in the city', including Blakes on Fownes Street and Liffey Street, Rosenthal's chemist on Merrion Row, Hamilton Long on O'Connell Street and Price's chemist on Clare Street. In addition, every fortnight, a chemist called Blair in Cork city ordered a gross and on occasions a gross would be posted on an order to NAFFI or the Junior Army and Navy Stores to the fort on Spike Island and Fort Camden at Lough Swilly. Perhaps recognising the influence of religion on individuals' family planning practices, Adams provided a detailed breakdown of the religions of staff working in the company, stating that 'of that staff one third were Protestant and of that staff no one availed of contraceptives with the exception of one protestant occasionally. We would usually cover this up by putting through an order for a sponge'. Adams wrote that he 'never knew of anyone of the said staff to avail of preventitives [sic] in the case of R.C. [Roman Catholics] conscience makes cowards of us all and if one was involved in an accident it would be far better to have rosary beads in your pocket'.[19]

As Sandra McAvoy has shown, some members of the Committee on Evil Literature which met in 1926 alleged that books on contraception were readily available in Ireland; Fr. Devane asserted that Marie Stopes' booklet *A Letter to Working Mothers* could be obtained from Kearney's of Stephen Street in Dublin, while the Revd M. Quinlan claimed that both Eason's and Hanna's bookshops stocked publications on birth control.[20] Moreover, advertising materials submitted to the Committee on Evil Literature showed that individuals could obtain contraceptive devices by mail order, if not through local sources.[21] In 1924, for instance, an advertisement for 'surgical rubber goods and appliances' appeared in the *Kerry News* for Le Brasseur Surgical MFG Co. Ltd in Birmingham, with readers advised to call or write for a 76-page Illustrated Catalogue and

[19] Letter to Taoiseach Jack Lynch from Keith Joseph Adams, 29 August 1972 [NAI, 2003/16/453].
[20] McAvoy, 'Its effect on public morality', on p. 43.
[21] McAvoy, 'The regulation of sexuality', p. 255.

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'Manual of Wisdom'.[22] Information on birth control was also accessible through advertisements in British newspapers and periodicals which could be bought in Ireland.[23] For example, in 1921 the *Freeman's Journal* carried an advertisement for George's Surgical Stores in London for 'rubber goods of every description for travelling, day and night use. Best quality only'. Readers could write for a catalogue sent under plain cover for free.[24] As well as this, Irish newspapers in the 1920s carried numerous advertisements for condoms, described as 'rubber goods'. Blake's Medical Stores in Middle Abbey Street, Dublin, for instance advertised 'surgical rubber goods, suspensory bandages, enemas, sprays, syringes, elastic stockings and all rubber appliances, Price list free' in the *Westmeath Independent* in 1919.[25] However, most Irish suppliers of condoms were not so blatant in advertising their wares.

Advertisements for Kearsley's 'Widow Welch's Female Pills', which were likely to have been abortifacients were carried by Irish newspapers in this period also.[26] In 1920, an advertisement for the pills from C & G Kearsley appeared in the *Sunday Independent* stating that they were 'prompt and reliable for ladies' and could be obtained from 'all Chemists, or Post free' from London.[27] The advertisement also appeared in the *Limerick Leader* in 1926, describing the product as 'a well-known remedy for female complaints'.[28] Following the introduction of the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929, however, such advertisements were banned in Irish newspapers, but Irish men and women would have been able to see such advertisements in British newspapers imported into the country.[29] Yet, as Mary E. Daly notes, a 1933 tax on imported newspapers and periodicals resulted in a drop of sales in newspapers, and 'threats to seize newspapers such as The Sunday Times in future if they carried advertisements for contraceptives or contraceptive advice soon resulted in their omission from the Irish edition'.[30]

In debates in the Seanad over the CLAA in 1935, some senators had warned that banning birth control would only serve to drive the

[22] 'Surgical rubber goods and appliances', *Kerry News*, 19 September 1924, p. 2. The advertisement was printed in a number of Irish newspapers during the 1920s, e.g., *Connacht Tribune*, 11 August 1923, p. 13.
[23] Pašeta, 'Censorship', p. 204.
[24] 'Surgical appliances', *Freeman's Journal*, 11 April 1921, p. 1.
[25] 'Medical', *Westmeath Independent*, 4 October 1919, p. 6.
[26] Greta Jones has highlighted an advertisement which appeared in the *Cork Free Press* in 1912. See Jones, 'Marie Stopes', p. 258.
[27] 'Female pills', *Sunday Independent*, 14 March 1920, p. 4.
[28] 'Hearsley's Original Widow Welch's Female Pills', *Limerick Leader*, 10 February 1926, p. 1.
[29] Jones, 'Marie Stopes', p. 258.
[30] Daly, 'Marriage, fertility and women's lives', p. 575.

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contraceptive trade underground. Senator Kathleen Clarke stated that while she was in agreement with the Church and State in their condemnation of contraceptives she was 'totally opposed to the Government's method of trying to deal with this crying evil'. Based on her experiences of prohibition in the United States which drove individuals to engage in an illicit trade of alcohol, Clarke believed that:

> prohibition in connection with this will work out in much the same way. I believe you will drive the trading in and the use of these things into secret and illicit channels in which you will not be able to get after them. You will not alone bring the State and the laws of the State into contempt by inserting prohibition in this Bill, but you will bring the Church and religion into contempt.

In Clarke's view, the prohibition of contraception would drive individuals to rebel against the law – 'the fact that they are prohibited from doing it often creates a desire within them'. Clarke argued that the trade in contraceptives in the country was not so great as to warrant prohibition, instead, 'we want something else; we want something more human than laws'. Senator John Philip Bagwell agreed with Clarke, stating 'What you will do by this legislation is, you will drive underground what is now overground. Whether that is a good thing or not is a matter of opinion. Personally, I do not think it is.' Nevertheless, in spite of these objections, the bill was passed with Section 17 which related to contraception left intact.[31]

Indeed, Clarke and Bagwell's predictions were accurate. Following the introduction of the CLAA, there were a number of cases of prosecutions against individuals who were importing or selling contraceptives illegally, with significant penalties attached. In many of the cases, it is clear that the judge in question wanted to make an example of the convicted person and appeals to fines or prison sentences were rarely granted. Discussion of these cases reveals concerns about 'foreign' influences on the Irish State but also shed light on notions of respectability among the pharmacists who were keen to distance themselves from this trade. After the first three years of the Act, however, there appear to have been few cases brought to the courts, or at least, these were not reported in the press.

The first two cases under the CLAA which related to the import of contraceptives did not result in arrests or fines. Messrs. Henry Bell, a chemist firm based in Waterford, was the first to be accused of

[31] Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 1934, Report Stage. Seanad Éireann debate – Wednesday 6 February 1935, 19:15. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1935-02-06/4/

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importation, or attempted importation of contraceptives under the CLAA. In August 1935, four containers of goods arrived in Waterford quays from British Drughouses Ltd and upon inspection by a Customs and Excise official, were found to contain 'one gross of contraceptives', namely quinine pessaries.[32] The Justice stated that there was not any suggestion that the chemists 'made trade of these things'.[33] During the case, Arthur Pitt, managing director and one of the owners of the firm, said that he had received prescriptions from doctors for the supply of the items mentioned and stated that the items were used as remedies for certain diseases and for cattle. He claimed that the item in question would be made up for doctors' prescriptions and not put in new boxes, and that over the last 17 years, he had never been asked for the item over the counter nor did his firm stock contraceptives.[34] The case was dismissed owing to extenuating circumstances under the Probation Act. In August 1936, Lep Transport Ltd. were fined £100 for the importation of contraceptives in October 1935.[35] In an appeal in November 1936, a representative for the company claimed that they did not know what the package contained and that they had nothing to gain by it except the 3*s.* 6*d.* importation fee. The goods were imported on behalf of Blake's Medical Stores, Fownes Street, Dublin. The Judge reversed the decision because he was not satisfied beyond all doubt that the company had known the contents of the package.[36] Interestingly, Blake's Medical Stores were not prosecuted for importing the contraceptives. Keith Joseph Adams' letter mentioned earlier suggests that this chemist had been involved in the contraceptive trade prior to the introduction of the CLAA.

In February 1936, a swoop by detectives and customs officers was made on chemist's shops in Dublin. A large number of chemists and depots were visited in a search for contraceptives, with the *Irish Press* reporting that 'a big haul was made in one instance'. An official from the Revenue Department stated that forbidden goods were usually seized at the port, but that recently, 'the goods were reaching this country in parcels, with declarations so vaguely or inaccurately worded, that they escaped detection'.[37] Pharmacists such as then vice-president of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, James O'Rourke, were quick to distance themselves from the purveyors of such goods. O'Rourke had been

[32] *Birth Control News*, 14:8, April 1936, p. 87. [33] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[34] 'Prosecution against Waterford firm', *Munster Express*, 20 March 1936, p. 7.
[35] '£100 fine in prohibited goods case', *Irish Times*, 14 August 1936, p. 12.
[36] 'Decision reversed', *Irish Times,* 3 November 1936, p. 2.
[37] 'Police raid chemists', *Irish Press*, 26 February 1936, p. 1.

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involved in debates around contraception since 1931, when, as Sandra McAvoy has shown, he dominated discussions over the 1931 Pharmacy Bill and 'pursued a ban on sales of contraceptives with an evangelizing zeal that suggested at least sympathy with the ideals of Catholic Action'.[38] Five years later, he was still heavily involved in these debates. In an interview with the *Irish Press*, he stated:

> A number of establishments in Dublin use titles and signs which convey the impression that they are all chemists, and it is notorious that for many years these premises have been the main centres for the distribution of the prohibited wares. In addition, it is well known that a number of other centres, mainly under the control of persons of foreign extraction have been engaged in the traffic.[39]

O'Rourke's testimony here is significant as it highlights a trade in contraceptives that existed in Dublin but also points the blame firmly on 'foreign' persons. In addition, O'Rourke tried to affirm the respectability of Irish chemists in obeying the law, and explained that the journal of their society refused to publish 'advertisements of a certain character'. Similarly, F. E. Smith, secretary of the Chemists' Branch of the Irish Union of Distributive Workers and Clerks emphasised that his association 'has always looked with disfavour on the transaction of business of such a type, and we would like that there should be no misrepresentation, or misunderstanding in the minds of the public', suggesting that the practice was not widespread and was confined to a few isolated cases.[40] In March 1936, following the prosecution of Messrs Henry Bell Ltd. chemists in Waterford for the attempted importation of contraceptives, O'Rourke wrote to the *Irish Press* to condemn the statement by the counsel for the defence who said during the trial that the case 'was of great importance to pharmaceutical chemists in the Free State'. O'Rourke assured readers that the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland 'which represents all creeds, has always taken up an attitude of the strongest opposition to this traffic'. O'Rourke emphasised that 'this traffic is of no concern whatever to Irish Pharmacy, with the exception of a few black sheep such as are to be found in every profession'.[41]

Examples continued to be made of individuals who were found to be dealing in the contraceptive trade. In July 1936, Charles Brocklebank, of the Medical Stores, Fownes Street, was accused of unlawfully keeping contraceptives for sale, harbouring prohibited goods and being involved in the importation of contraceptives.[42] In February 1936, following the interception of goods by Customs, Brocklebank's premises was searched

[38] McAvoy, 'Its effect on public morality', p. 48.
[39] 'Chemists and raids', *Irish Press*, 27 February 1936, p. 1. [40] *Ibid.*
[41] 'Chemists and recent prosecution', *Irish Press*, 17 March 1936, p. 14.
[42] 'Jail sentence and fine', *Irish Times*, 4 July 1936, p. 4.

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and a locker containing cartons which stored small tins of rubber sheaths, in addition to eight similar cartons containing the same type of contraceptives were found in the cellar of his premises.[43] Brocklebank argued that these goods had been at the premises for two years, that they were not for sale, and that the parcel intercepted by customs had been a plant by the director of another firm with whom he and his brother had worked before starting their own business.[44] Brocklebank was fined a total of £250 in addition to six months' imprisonment with hard labour, with additional fines to be allocated if he did not pay on time. In imposing the fines, Mr. Little 'said that he hoped that the putting into effect of that section of the Act would have a salutary effect and that they would not be troubled with such prosecutions in future'.[45] In an appeal in 1936, the fines were allowed to stand but the sentence of imprisonment was remitted because of the 'adverse effect' this would have on the defendant's future medical career.[46] Similarly, Christopher Grouse from Dublin, was prosecuted in May 1937 for illegally importing contraceptives. Grouse's residence was searched under warrant and two sealed envelopes containing fifteen contraceptives were found in a drawer in his living room. Grouse initially denied knowledge of these but then stated he had purchased them in Belfast and not declared them when passing through Dundalk on the train.[47] Grouse was fined £100.[48] In 1938, two men, Frank McCreech and Bernard Brennan, based at Bride Street, Dublin were fined £50 each for illegally possessing contraceptives for sale.[49]

Those engaging in the contraceptive trade tended to be denoted as outsiders. As Mosse has suggested in his work on sexuality, nationalism, and respectability in twentieth-century Europe, 'such outsiders were regarded as potential revolutionaries, as frightening as any who mounted the barricades'.[50] In the case of male abortionists in post-independence Ireland, particular attention was drawn to their non-Irish ethnicities and non-Christian religions in order to portray them as outsiders.[51] Jewish grocers and chemists appear to have been particularly targeted by the legislation on contraception. As Trisha Kessler's work has shown, in the early twentieth century, Jewish shopkeepers were viewed as 'unwanted competition amidst rising fears that large numbers of Jews were entering

[43] 'Criminal law charges', *Irish Times*, 3 July 1936, p. 13.
[44] 'Jail sentence and fine', p. 4. [45] *Ibid.*
[46] 'Student's appeal', *Evening Echo*, 2 November 1936, p. 2.
[47] 'Dublin District Court', *Irish Times*, 25 May 1937, p. 2.
[48] '£100 fine for importing prohibited goods', *Irish Independent*, 1 June 1937, p. 10.
[49] 'Two men fined', *Irish Times*, 18 February 1938, p. 2.
[50] Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, p. 151.
[51] Delay and Liger, 'Bad mothers', pp. 297–300.

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Ireland'. Rhetoric around Jewish migrants 'termed Irish economic practices as legitimate and those of Jews as illegitimate' and 'implicit in this narrative was the suggestion that Jewish economic ways were potentially harmful to the nation'.[52] The case of Ivor Kronn in 1936 exemplifies this rhetoric and shows how anti-Semitism could be invoked in court rulings. Kronn, a Jewish grocer was summoned in July 1936 on eight counts under the CLAA for unlawfully keeping contraceptives for sale, selling contraceptives and importing contraceptives.

The discovery of Kronn's involvement in the contraceptive trade had come about when a sixteen-year-old boy, Lewis Davies, was arrested in connection with another offence and was found to have two contraceptives in his possession. The police then visited Kronn's premises in Lower Clanbrassil Street and discovered a number of contraceptives there and at his private residence. In his evidence in the court case, Davies stated that at the end of January 1936, he had gone to Kronn's shop with his cousin David Woolfson. Woolfson had given Kronn one shilling and in return was given three contraceptives which were brought from a room behind the shop. Davies gave his cousin a shilling and obtained the contraceptives, giving his cousin one and retaining two, which the police found in his possession. Woolfson alleged that he did not want them for himself. Kronn explained during the case of the goods that 'married men used them to prevent children', to which Woolfson replied, 'I prefer the children'. Evidence was also produced to show that Kronn had ordered 14lb of contraceptives valued at £31 12*s* from the London Rubber Company which had arrived in Dublin in January that year. The closing statement of the Judge, Mr. Little, clearly highlighted Kronn's Jewish identity. In his conviction speech, Little stated that the defendant 'clearly belonged to a community among whom the Old Testament was revered'. Little further emphasised ideas of race suicide and the damaging impact of birth control on the nation, arguing 'the greatest danger in European civilisation to-day was the question of birth control'. Kronn received a significant sentence of £200 in fines (four fines of £50) as well as six months' imprisonment with hard labour. If the fines were not paid within 14 days, another 13 months would be added to his sentence.[53] An appeal by Kronn in October 1936 resulted in the fine being reduced to £100 but the prison sentence was to stand.[54] Kronn's case was not exceptional. Obstetrician and gynaecologist, Michael

[52] Trisha Oakley Kessler, 'In search of Jewish footprints in the West of Ireland', *Jewish Culture and History*, 19:2, pp. 191–208, on p. 195.
[53] 'Criminal law charge', *Irish Times*, 2 July 1936, p. 8. [54] *Ibid.*, 23 October 1936, p. 14.

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Solomons (1919–2007), recalled the prosecution of a Jewish chemist, Sam Rosenthal who ran The Modern Pharmacy, on Merrion Row:

> As a young man I had listened to my father's indignant reaction when a local chemist, Rosenthal of Merrion Row, was visited by Gardaí, fined, and threatened with closure if he continued to sell condoms.[55]

Five summonses against Rosenthal in respect to goods prohibited under the CLAA were dismissed in July 1936.[56] And, in July 1936, a case was taken against David Glick, a chemist's assistant. A 1911 census record indicates that Glick was Jewish, his father Bernard Glick is listed in the census as a 'commercial merchant'.[57] Glick had been on holidays in August 1935 and had purchased three dozen contraceptives in London. Glick was found to have possession of two dozen of these in his home. He claimed that these were for his own private use and that he had not declared them at Customs as he did not think it was necessary. Glick was fined £100 for the importation of the contraceptives.[58] And, in 1938, Munshi Singh and Hazoor Singh, two men from Lahore, India, were sentenced to four months' imprisonment for the sale of contraceptives. Newspaper reports of the case evidently racialised the two men. An article in the *Connacht Tribune* began with the sentence 'Last week, two dusky visitors arrived in Castlebar, adorned with turbans and carrying suitcases which contained certain prohibited articles in violation of the Criminal Law Amendment Acts [sic]'.[59] Munsi Singh was described in one report in the *Irish Times* as 'a holy man in the Buddhist religion' while another report described the two men as 'two Hindoo gentlemen'.[60] According to the *Irish Independent*, the men had been in Castlebar for a period telling fortunes, selling silk fabrics and offering to buy old gold. Munshi Singh told the Justice that he had bought the contraceptives in a chemist shop in Dublin but had not sold any.[61] The Justice said that the men were 'engaged in a dangerous and nefarious trade forbidden by the law'.[62] In their appeal the following month, however, doubts were raised that the men had actually been selling the contraceptives as the articles were found in their pockets rather than in their pedlar's bag. Given that

[55] Michael Solomons, *Pro Life? The Irish Question* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1992), p. 22.
[56] 'Criminal law charge', *Irish Times*, 2 July 1936, p. 8.
[57] Census record for Glick family, Wolseley Street, Dublin. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Dublin/Merchant_s_Quay/Wolseley_St_/67552/
[58] 'Criminal law charges', *Irish Times*, 3 July 1936, p. 13.
[59] 'Two dusky visitors arrive', *Connacht Tribune*, 21 May 1938, p. 7.
[60] 'Irish news in brief', *Irish Times*, 13 May 1938, p. 3 and 'Circuit court, Tuesday', *Connacht Telegraph*, 18 June 1938, p. 4.
[61] 'Castlebar charge', *Irish Independent*, 13 May 1938, p. 5.
[62] 'Engaged in a nefarious trade', *Western People*, 21 May 1938, p. 4.

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there was no evidence that the contraceptives were for sale, the convictions were reversed and the charges dismissed.[63]

Moving into the late 1930s and the 1940s, however, there appear to have been less prosecutions for the sale of contraceptives. There are three potential explanations for this: it is possible that the highly publicised prosecutions which took place in the 1930s had acted as an effective deterrent to individuals to avoid engagement with this trade. Alternatively, it may have been the case that the authorities were beginning to turn a blind eye to such crimes. A third potential explanation might be the impact that the Second World War had on black market networks.[64] As Claire Jones has noted, the war disrupted domestic contraceptive production in Britain as 'supplies of rubber, spring steel for use in rubber cervical caps and quinine for the manufacture of chemical pessaries were significantly reduced and grew worse as the war went on'.[65] Regardless, contraception continued to be viewed by opponents as a 'foreign', corrupting influence well into the twentieth century, as will be discussed in Chapter 8. As the next section will show through letters from Irish men and women to Marie Stopes, the legal restrictions on access to contraception as well as censorship on information relating to birth control had an important impact on individuals' reproductive choices.

1.3 Letters to Marie Stopes from Ireland

Marie Stopes (1880–1958) was a British palaeobotanist, birth control campaigner and eugenicist.[66] In 1918, following her disastrous first marriage, Stopes published her first book on sexual relationships, *Married Love,* which was followed up later that year by the book, *Wise Parenthood,* which contained advice on birth control.[67] She went on to establish birth control clinics in Britain and campaign for birth control through her publication *Birth Control News*. Stopes encouraged readers to write to her and a huge archive of thousands of letters from correspondents around the world as well as replies from Stopes is held at the Wellcome Collection. This includes letters from Irish correspondents.[68]

[63] 'Hindoos in Castlebar circuit court', *Connaught Telegraph*, 25 June 1938, p. 5.
[64] With thanks to Cara Delay for suggesting this possible explanation.
[65] Claire L. Jones, *The Business of Birth Control: Contraception and Commerce in Britain Before the Sexual Revolution* (Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 48.
[66] For a recent biography of Stopes see Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (Palgrave, 2018).
[67] Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Palgrave, 2012), pp. 82–3.
[68] See: Lesley Hall, 'The archives of birth control in Britain', *Journal of the Society of Archivists,* 16:2, (1995), pp. 207–18.

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A letter from a 24-year-old woman living in Sligo in 1918 is typical. The woman explained that she had been married for two years. She and her husband did not want to have a baby for six or eight months after they got married 'and we practised what you call coitus interruptus, and I was left stimulated and unsatisfied each time'. Their son was born 'by mutual wish' 16 months after their marriage. She explained to Stopes her frustration at the many books they had read from the 'Self and Sex series' by Vir Publishing, stating 'Some way it's the same thing in all of them, that no union should take place except for procreation only. Surely it strikes fear into a woman's heart every time coitus takes place that she will conceive when she doesn't want to.' The woman explained her rationale for trying to space her pregnancies using the withdrawal method and asked Stopes for advice about douching after intercourse:

> Since the birth of our boy we have reasoned out the sexual act more than heretofore and my husband can usually contain himself to give me an orgasm before he reaches his climax on withdrawal – now he wishes me to ask you – whether its syringing with vinegar and water or just washing out immediately afterwards that will kill the sperm immediately – if he stayed in – we tried when we were married first quinine pessaries but they affected my head and I did not know how that was until I read your book. We don't want another baby too soon as we agree that when they come tripping one another they cannot be as healthy as if they were 2 or 3 years apart. Being married yourself you won't mind giving us your advice.[69]

This letter gives insights not only into this couple's family planning methods but suggests that the couple's rationale for spacing their pregnancies came from a belief that doing so would result in healthier children. Cormac Ó Gráda and Niall Duffy's study of letters sent by Irish and Scottish men and women to Marie Stopes has shown how 'the postal service provided a voice to some of those living far from the early family planning clinics, that it guaranteed confidentiality, and that it was inexpensive'.[70] Their analysis of the Irish letters suggests that men were more likely to write than women, and that women were more likely to write on birth control with men more likely to write on recurrent sexual problems. Irish letters were more likely to come from the northern counties which later became Northern Ireland and provide evidence of a demand for 'spacing' children.[71] In my analysis of the letters, I will

[69] [WC, PP/MCS/A/42]
[70] Cormac Ó Gráda and Niall Duffy, 'The fertility transition in Ireland and Scotland, *c.*1880–1930' in S.J. Connolly, R.A. Houston and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Conflict, Identity and Economic Development: Ireland and Scotland, 1600–1939* (Preston: Carnegie Publishing, 1995), pp. 89–102, on p. 98.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

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focus on those which requested advice on birth control. Of course, as Ó Gráda and Duffy have pointed out, these letters were primarily coming from middle-class and literate men and women.[72] Nevertheless, for an era where there is such limited archival evidence of personal experiences of family planning, and without the opportunity to interview men and women who lived in this period, they are an important source for understanding the problems faced by men and women living under legislative restrictions to access in the early twentieth century.

Evidence from the letters suggests that Irish men and women struggled to gain access to information on birth control and Stopes' publications even in the period prior to the introduction of the 1929 Censorship Act. An Irish man, writing to Stopes in 1918 stated:

> As a young husband I have been intensely interested in your book 'Married Love'. At the same time I do not think you realise how difficult it is for the ordinary man to get any reliable information as to the safest means to control birth. If you can inform me, or put me in the way of obtaining information as to the approved anti-conceptional methods I shall be deeply grateful.[73]

Similarly, a woman from Dublin writing to Stopes in April 1922 explained that she had tried to obtain one of Stopes' books but had not succeeded. She wrote 'I am a married woman with four young children and I am very keenly interested in your subjects' and asked if Stopes could send her a copy or tell her where to obtain one. Stopes' secretary replied with details of her book *Wise Parenthood* 'which gives full details concerning Birth Control. If you have any difficulty in obtaining these locally (as you probably will) I should advise you to apply direct to the publishers'.[74]

It is likely that letters addressed to Stopes from Irish men and women may have been detected by customs officials. A man writing to her from Dublin in 1933 for instance addressed his letter to Stopes' married name 'as you are not popular in official circles here and letters might be opened for inspection'.[75] In reply to a man who wrote to her in 1935 to commend her work on contraception and ask about obtaining more of her publications, Stopes replied:

> I am glad to have an interested reader in your country. You can get any of my books sent in plain envelopes from the Society which I founded and which is running in London. The two of which I enclose slips would probably interest you. The difficulty, however, may be that your Customs people may stop them. If you don't mind the trouble I should very much like to know how you managed to get hold of 'Contraception'. Is it permitted? Did you buy it from an ordinary

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 98. [73] [WC, PP/MCS/A/86]. [74] [WC, PP/MCS/A/229].
[75] [WC, PP/MCS/A/13].

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bookseller? Because as you know the Roman Catholics have been very active in interfering with the sale of my books.[76]

Information on Stopes' activities and publications appear to have been disseminated through the British press in Ireland in this period and evidence from the letters suggests that Stopes' ideas were gaining traction among a number of men and women. Writing in November 1918, a woman from Wexford explained that she had read an article by Stopes in the *Sunday Chronicle*, an English newspaper. The woman wrote that she had lost two children, one had been stillborn and the other had died as a result of spina-bifida. She wrote that because of this experience, she and her husband did not wish to have any more children and wanted advice on a remedy or where she could get more information, stating 'I have sought for some very persistently but without hope and should be ever obliged if you could throw some light on this matter'. The woman clearly felt embarrassed about writing to Stopes for advice, mentioning 'this is a subject one does not like approaching and as a consequence, I have kept putting the matter off ever since I read and re-read your article'.[77]

Similarly, a man living in Queen's County (later Laois), and also a reader of the *Sunday Chronicle*, wrote to Stopes in 1921 to ask advice on birth control. He and his wife had four children and wanted to avoid having any more. His wife was 'not at all strong owing to one of her kidneys having fallen after our last baby and our Dr said it would be better if she had no more children. But he did not tell us how to prevent them'. The man also explained that his salary as a lawyer's clerk was not sufficient enough to provide all they required in addition to further expenses from another child. He asked Stopes 'would you be so kind as to tell us how we may prevent a further increase in our family, or if it is possible (apart from abstinence from intercourse) without injury to my health, or further damage to my wife's. I am sure you can understand how easier it is for us to ask you, a stranger, these questions, than to approach our local Dr or any other friend in the matter'.[78] The man's comments about his doctor highlight the difficult dilemma that individuals were placed in without proper access to effective birth control as well as illustrating a broader reluctance from members of the medical profession to provide advice. In her reply, Stopes sent details of her publications which advised on different methods of birth control and suggested the man should write directly to the publisher to obtain them. She also wrote 'I know that Ireland is a difficult country, and you may not be able to obtain from your local chemist the things necessary. If this is so, write direct to Messrs.

[76] [WC, PP/MCS/A/68]. [77] [WC, PP/MSC/A/2]. [78] [WC, PP/MSC/A/210].

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E. Lambert & Son, Manufacturing Chemists, 60, Queen's Road, Dalston, London.'[79] A woman from Cork writing to Stopes in 1923 explained that she had followed Stopes' case in the *Daily Mail* and that she was 'very much in favour of your views on the "Birth Control" & of the rise of contraceptives'. The woman had two sons, one aged 2 years and 2 months and one aged 1 year old. She asked Stopes to forward on one or two of her books stating that 'several of my friends, including of course myself, would very much like to possess your worthy books which are unfortunately unobtainable here'.[80] Information on Stopes' books continued to be disseminated through the British press in Ireland into the 1930s. A married man from Waterford wrote to her in 1937 stating he had seen her books advertised in the *Daily Mirror* and asked if she would send him a booklet describing the books available for sale.[81]

Stopes was well aware of the difficulties that Irish men and women had in accessing her texts and contraceptives more generally. In 1929, Miss A, a woman living in Cardiff, wrote to Stopes to say that she was planning to leave Cardiff to be married and that she and her husband would be living in Co. Wicklow. Miss A asked:

> I am anxious to know if you could tell me whether birth control appliances are available anywhere in Dublin and if so, where. There are I know the very strongest prejudices against anything of this kind throughout Ireland, and also I believe a legislation relative thereto which differs from our own. At present I only know Ireland very slightly, but I gather that throughout the country neither ignorance nor prejudice in such matters are confined to the peasant classes.[82]

Stopes replied promptly, advising the woman to be fitted with a cap at her clinic, or to visit the nurses at the travelling clinic in Wales before her marriage. She further explained:

> As regards your question about Ireland, I do not know whether contraceptives can be purchased there, I fancy they are criminal in Ireland. You should take a supply with you and get your further supplies by post, but whether they will reach you I cannot tell at all.[83]

In her responses to letters asking for information on contraception, Stopes tended to advise respondents to visit one of her English clinics, however, for many respondents, this would have been financially prohibitive. For instance, in reply to a woman from Dublin writing in 1922, Stopes suggested that she should come to London to be personally fitted

[79] [WL, PP/MSC/A/210]. [80] [WC, PP/MCS/A/58]. [81] [WC, PP/MCS/A/88].
[82] [WC, PP/MCS/A/10]. [83] [WC, PP/MCS/A/10].

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with a cap as 'I know of no-one in Ireland who could help you with this, and it is very important that the cap should fit properly'.[84]

Some of the letters received by Stopes were very personal in nature and highlight the fear and anguish experienced by many women without lack of access to contraception or information about family planning.

A letter from a woman living in Cork writing in 1923 highlighted the impact of Catholic teachings against contraception:

> Dear Dr. Stopes, my case is like this: my husband is Catholic, he will not prevent and I am not strong enough to keep having a child. I married young 20 yrs, and I have just started on the road for my fifth child, my husband is what one would call eccentric, he is 12 yrs my senior, he is always studying, and must keep suffering and if I complain he says I am always grumbling, my means will not allow of my getting help, when I was courting he gave me the idea that I would be somebody quite comfortably off, I was only 17 yrs when he came over to Ireland and three years later I came across and married him, I am away from all my people and old friends and I cannot stand the strain of continuously being sick, no man is worth it I think I have as much as I can manage with four young children, the oldest is 7 years. Look at all the yrs before me and if I do not learn of something to prevent me from being all the time in bad health, I am afraid life would be a burden, I am splendid in health until I fall, then my misery starts.[85]

The woman explained that she was over two months pregnant and asked Stopes for advice on how to procure an abortion:

> there is I have heard a bottle called 'Black Mixture'. I have no way of getting it because the nurse that would send it is travelling the world. I suddenly thought of you and I knew if anyone would help you would, I do not mind what your fee is, if only I was in London, that is my home, I could explain my life to you, it has been one big disappointment and only that I have all the children I wouldn't stay here.[86]

Cara Delay's work on illegal abortion has suggested that in Ireland, physical harm methods such as the consumption of herbs, purgatives, and pills was a more common means for women to procure an abortion.[87] The woman stated in her letter that she had already taken 'quantities of pills but I am so strong that it was no use, I feel sure the black mixture would put me right'. In her view 'when God laid down the laws of nature he never meant us to be human incubators, nature is there, and so is our intelligence to know what our strength can stand, one is just as wrong to abuse as the other, my husband is peculiar on that point that I am just like a machine for his use'. Moreover, she expressed her difficulties in obtaining abortifacients, stating 'Cork is such an old-fashioned goody-goody place

[84] [WC, PP/MCS/A/167]. [85] [WC, PP/MCS/A/163]. [86] [WC, PP/MCS/A/163].
[87] Delay, 'Pills, potions, and purgatives'.

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that they would not sell you what you wanted if they thought it was for a wrong purpose. I do not want to be free for getting around or to be going with other men, all I want is to be and keep in good health to make my household happy and to be able to do my duties, which one cannot do if one is feeling ill'.[88]

No reply was included with the letter from Stopes, however, she was staunchly anti-abortion so it is possible that she simply did not reply to the request.

Recognising the demand for family planning services on the island of Ireland, in 1936, a year after the introduction of the CLAA, Marie Stopes opened her Mothers' Clinic at 103, The Mount, Belfast, which was in a working-class district of the city. An article in the *Birth Control News* in September 1936 announced the establishment of the clinic to 'provide gynaecological and birth-control help for poor Irish mothers' and requested contributors from supporters of the Society for Constructive Birth Control (CBC) 'for this most urgently needed help for Irish motherhood'.[89] While Stopes recognised that situating the clinic in Ulster meant that 'this source of help will not be so available to those in the Irish Free State as it should be', there was the expectation that the Belfast clinic would 'serve the whole geographic country of Ireland' and that women could travel by bus or train between Dublin and Ulster.[90] Writing to an Irish supporter from Donegal in 1937, Stopes explained that while the clinic was living on a 'very hand-to-mouth existence', she noted 'people are coming up from Dublin and elsewhere to the Belfast clinic now.'[91] The expectation was that the clinic would result in 'more healthy and happy Irish boys and girls, and fewer miserable and tormented lives'.[92] As Greta Jones has shown, the clinic advised married women on birth control as well as helping with infertility. Consultations were free but the patient had to pay for the cost of appliances.[93] Reflecting on a year of work in 1937, Stopes believed that the Belfast clinic had been 'of great help, I believe, to the country of Ireland as a whole, not only to that city'.[94] The clinic did not have political support and faced opposition from the Catholic Church in Belfast, while few medical men were prepared to come out in support of birth control.[95] As Jones has shown, 'many of the women already knew of or practised some form of fertility control prior to attending the Mothers'

[88] [WC, PP/MCS/A/163].
[89] 'In Ireland', *Birth Control News*, September 1936, 15:4, p. 37.
[90] 'Ireland', *Birth Control News*, November 1936, 15:6, p. 63.
[91] [WC, PP/MCS/A/A116]
[92] 'Ireland', *Birth Control News*, November 1936, 15:6, p. 63.
[93] Jones, 'Marie Stopes', p. 265.
[94] 'Behind the scenes in the year's work', *Birth Control News*, December 1937, 14:5, p. 53.
[95] Jones, 'Marie Stopes', p. 268.

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Clinic' with practices including abortion, breastfeeding, abstinence, coitus interruptus, sponges and condoms.[96] Attendance at the clinic was usually motivated by the ineffectiveness of these methods.[97]

Testimony from a nurse at the Belfast Clinic published in *Birth Control News* in 1937 outlined the problems facing women in the Irish Free State:

> A patient came up from Dublin to be fitted. She says it is dreadful in the Free State now, for it is impossible to get any kind of preventive. They had always, up to recently, been able to get X's pessaries from the chemists, but now it is a criminal offence for chemists to stock them. She thinks it is so unfair that the Roman Church can force its will on the Protestants also. Her neighbour, who is a Catholic, is to have her seventeenth child in March. This woman is full of T.B., half her children have died and those who are living are tubercular, and yet the Priest tells her it is right for her to go on bearing a child every year.[98]

The nurse's testimony highlights the problems faced by Protestant women who were subject to legal barriers of access to contraception but also the challenges faced by Catholic women who wanted to adhere to Church teachings. Her testimony also suggests the power of the local priest in encouraging women to have large families, a theme which persisted well into the twentieth century as Chapter 5 will show. Another report on the clinic described how an unmarried Catholic woman had come to the Belfast clinic asking for an abortion, telling the nurse 'that she had had three abortions in 1936 produced by a chemist in Dublin to whom she had paid in all £20.' The chemist apparently had to leave Dublin and the woman came to Belfast having heard there was a birth control clinic there. However, as the report stated 'she had a totally wrong idea of the work of the Clinic and went away much disappointed that birth control clinics disapprove of abortion'.[99] Reflecting on this particular case, Stopes wrote that she believed the significant opposition from the Catholic Church was because 'sound and wholesome control of conception places motherhood in a woman's own hands. But if she is kept ignorant and driven to abortion or producing unhealthy infants in her misery, then she is at the mercy of someone who has to be paid, be it priest or doctor'.[100]

Stopes' replies to women who wrote to her were often empathetic. Writing to Stopes in 1943, a woman from Kilkenny explained that she had read Stopes' letter in the *New Review* and wondered 'if you would ever be so terribly kind as to help me? You said in your letter that strangers sometimes write to you so please don't think it is awful cheek on my part'. The woman wrote that she had had four children 'and two

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 269. [97] *Ibid.*, p. 269.
[98] 'From our Belfast clinic', *Birth Control News*, March 1937, 15:10, p. 111.
[99] 'No free state clinics', *Birth Control News*, May 1937, 15:12, p. 145.
[100] 'Behind the scenes in the year's work', *Birth Control News*, December 1937, 14:5, p. 53.

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mishaps' in eight years and that the 'worry and fear' about subsequent pregnancies 'is absolutely ruining my whole life, I even have nightmares about it, day & night the dread of it haunts me. So will you please send me some instructions? I shall be forever grateful to you'. The woman stated that she had asked doctors, nurses and chemists for advice 'but no good, and of course in this country one can't buy things'.[101] In her reply, Stopes apologised that she could not send her correspondent printed instructions as 'anything we send is opened and destroyed' but advised the woman 'strongly to go personally over the border to 103, The Mount, Belfast, where my representative will give you such help as I would give myself, without any charge'.[102] The clinic closed in 1947 as Stopes' expenses increased as a result of the war, however, during its existence it saw 3,000–4,000 first-time patients.[103]

Letters to Stopes were sometimes published in *Birth Control News* in order to highlight the need and demand for birth control services in Ireland. A letter from a woman from Dublin published in 1937 requesting information on how to procure an abortion highlighted the impact of a lack of information on contraception. The woman explained that her doctor had referred her to contact Stopes and that she had '3 other children eldest aged 5 besides an infant 6 weeks old which I am nursing. I went under a serious operation last July and I took fits at the birth of the present infant which almost cost me my life. I was also in danger of fits in the previous children owing to a kidney trouble so that I dread a repetition'.[104] In an editor's note in the publication, it was stated that Dr. Stopes 'will not and cannot answer such letters. To do so in a manner approved by the writer would be a criminal offence. The letter itself is an incitement, and the writer of it is guilty of a criminal offence'.[105] Another letter published in the same issue from Mrs. C.C., also based in Dublin, explained that she had recently had a stillbirth at eight months. She stated 'This was my first baby and I was very much disappointed because I am very fond of children and long for one of my own, but as I am anaemic at present my husband and I do not want to start another baby till I am fully recovered. I wonder if you could help me with some safe form of birth control as I do not wish the same thing to occur again. Hoping you will understand and help me'.[106] What is interesting about some of these accounts is that these Irish women were framing their desire for effective birth control in terms of concerns about the impact that having subsequent children would have on their health.

[101] [WC, PP/MCS/A/88] [102] [WC, PP/MCS/A/88]
[103] Jones, 'Marie Stopes', pp. 270–1.
[104] 'Correspondence', *Birth Control News*, June 1937, 16:1, p. 11. [105] *Ibid.*
[106] *Ibid.*

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It is evident that there was an appetite for birth control among some men and women in Ireland and support for Stopes' ideas. The owner of a bookshop and newsagent in Dublin contacted Stopes in 1926 to alert her to the sitting of the Committee on Evil Literature stating, 'all literature relating to Birth Control is being attacked and the Committee is being asked to exclude it and advertisements relating to it from the Free State'. Stopes and the man entered into correspondence, and she asked him to send her any information relating to the Committee such as reports or newspaper accounts of its sittings. In a subsequent letter to the man, she stated 'In view of the fact that I do not want your letter opened, would you mind addressing it not to me personally, but to Mr. Bagge at the above address, as I have a feeling that my name on the envelope will probably lead to it being opened'.[107]

There were also Irish individuals who agreed with Stopes' work in England and were evidently interested in introducing her ideas to Ireland. One woman, writing to Stopes in 1937 asked whether it would be possible for Stopes to meet her and her sister 'with reference to introducing to Ireland the rights you have conferred on poor women here.'[108] It is unclear whether Stopes and the woman met, although subsequent correspondence in 1940 suggests they did. In another letter from 1940, the woman wrote:

> As I explained I do not entirely see eye to eye with you as regards method. However, our general purpose of giving more health and happiness to women and children is the same. This probably sounds impatient coming from an unknown individual like myself. However, your propaganda had much to do with my becoming a nationalist and starting four years ago to fit myself to eventually set up a 'Preparation for Marriage' centre in Dublin. For this I gave up my private experimental school for small children which was the apple of my eye.[109]

Writing again the same year, she thanked Stopes for meeting her and that it would 'probably be three or four years before I get my ideas going'.[110] It is unclear if the woman did go on to formalise her plans but her correspondence, and that of other members of the public in Ireland who wrote to Stopes, suggests there was support for her ideas and that her publications were reaching some men and women.

Irish doctors were also limited in access to contraceptive devices and advice. The Marie Stopes archive contains a number of letters from Irish doctors who wrote to Stopes for information. Writing in 1926, a Monaghan doctor explained that 'Being a constant reader of John Bull I notice you strongly advise the use of contraceptives in suitable cases.

[107] [WC, PP/MCS/A/76]. [108] [WC, PP/MCS/A/71]. [109] [WC, PP/MCS/A/71].
[110] [WC, PP/MCS/A/71].

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I have a patient who really needs something in that way.'[111] Similarly, a female doctor writing from Cork in 1923 asked Stopes where a patient might obtain 'the cap which you recommend for Birth Control'.[112] A Dublin specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics wrote to Stopes in 1936 to ask if it might be possible to obtain the 'composition of the greasy solubles which you recommend for use with the caps and diaphragms'. He remarked that several of his patients used these but were finding that 'owing to the increased vigilance of the Customs authorities in this country they are being held up in transit. If I could give them the necessary prescription they could be made up at the local chemists as an ordinary preparation'.[113] Stopes replied stating that the matter had been placed before their committee and that they regretted that they could not provide the formula because 'when such requests in former days have been acceded to, such unfortunate results have accrued' with commercial firms advertising 'our President's name in a manner most detrimental to her and to our Society'. However, they advised that there would soon be a clinic opening in Belfast where pessaries and other contraceptives could be obtained with more ease.[114]

Moving into the 1950s, some individuals received birth control advice and contraceptives by post from the Family Planning Association in London. As Greta Jones notes, in the 1950s the FPA received requests for information from Ireland and 'succeeded in sending information to the Republic' by posting parcels out in plain packing and addressing them by hand.[115] In April 1953, for example, Dublin-based doctor Marie Hadden wrote to the FPA to ask if they had 'any publications suitable to give to a young man and woman contemplating early marriage who are anxious to plan their family to suit their programme of careers for both?' Recognising that a reply from the FPA could be intercepted, Hadden asked them to reply 'under plain cover because – as you are no doubt aware – your society's work is not very well received in this country at present'.[116] Indeed, publications sent by the FPA to individuals were intercepted by Customs and Excise. A surviving 1954 letter from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners at Dublin Castle to the FPA, indicates that they were returning a copy of the prohibited book *Any Wife or Any Husband* which the FPA had addressed to a man based in Cork.[117] The FPA secretary replied to this letter expressing 'our extreme

[111] [WC, PP/MCS/A/271]. [112] *Ibid.* [113] [WC, PP/MCS/A/261].
[114] [WC, PP/MCS/A/261]. [115] Jones, 'Marie Stopes', p. 270.
[116] Letter from Dr. Marie A. Hadden to the FPA, 28 April 1953. [WC, A21/7].
[117] Letter from Office of the Revenue Commissioners to the FPA, 12 November 1954. [WC, A21/7].

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surprise that such a book should be prohibited, as it is published for the purpose of helping those couples who are experiencing difficulties in the marriage relationship.'[118]

Other individuals obtained contraceptives directly from England. Máirin Johnston (b.1931) a member of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, recalled in an oral history interview that she and her then husband obtained condoms by post from England:

I don't know what they were called then, but we used to call them French letters. We didn't call them anything else.

Johnston remembered seeing an advertisement that said:

'Rubber goods, sent under plain cover.' It didn't say what they were, just 'rubber goods sent under plain cover' and there was a box number, and you sent your cheque or whatever, in an envelope and you sent it off to this box, and back came the rubber goods. They were like tubes of a bicycle, they were so thick.

Similarly, Dermot Hourihane (1933–2020), a founder member of the Fertility Guidance Company, also explained in an oral history interview that he obtained condoms by mail order from the FPA in England. However, for the majority of individuals, without the knowledge of these organisations, options for family planning were limited to natural methods.

1.4 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, in early twentieth-century Ireland, contraception was framed as a British or European negative influence. Pharmacists distanced themselves from the illegal sale of contraceptives owing to a lack of respectability with this association. Moreover, those who were engaged in the contraceptive trade were, like abortionists, othered as a result of their race or religion, in an attempt to suggest that birth control was not an Irish or indeed Catholic practice in the newly established Irish Free State. While the personal family planning experiences of individuals born in the early twentieth century are difficult to uncover, oral history interviews with individuals about their parents' experiences illustrate the impact of Church and State regulation on 'ordinary' people's lives. They also reveal interesting things about common perceptions of the experiences of older Irish generations and how younger generations situate their own experiences in contrast to these. Moreover, it is clear that silences reveal both a reluctance on behalf of parents to discuss these

[118] Letter from FPA to the Revenue Commissioners, Dublin Castle, 26 November 1954. [WC, A21/7].

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issues with their children but could also point to the impact of trauma. Letters to Marie Stopes and the experiences of individuals detailed in her publication *Birth Control News* suggests that there was an appetite in Ireland for information on effective methods of family planning. This, combined with evidence of the black market in Ireland suggests that some individuals were at least attempting to resist Church and State authority, even if they were ultimately unsuccessful.

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