"Keep Your Seats and Face Facts": Western Canadian Women’s Discussion of Birth Control in the 1920s

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Abstract. Written evidence of "ordinary" Canadians discussing in the first decades of this century the motives for and the means of limiting family size is rare. The letters on this subject that were printed in The Western Producer in 1927 are therefore of special interest. In placing them in context one is reminded that the struggle to control fertility—far from being a product of the post-World-War-II age—has a long history.

Résumé. Les Canadiens «ordinaires» des premières décennies du vingtième siècle n’ont laissé que de rares écrits-témoins à l’égard de la limitation des naissances dans les familles et des moyens d’y parvenir. Ainsi, les lettres à ce sujet publiées dans Western Producer en 1927 possèdent un intérêt tout particulier. En les remettant dans leur contexte, on se rend compte de nouveau que la lutte pour régler les problèmes de fertilité—loin de provenir de l’époque qui suivit la Deuxième Guerre mondiale—existe depuis fort longtemps.

In September 1927 a prairie woman sent the editor of The Western Producer a poignant plea for help. “I am 31, the mother of 7 children, eldest 11 years, and youngest 8 months, not at all strong, and owing to farm conditions, very heavily in debt. I would like to have any information I can get re birth control.” “I, too, am greatly interested in the subject,” wrote a second woman in October, “—have a family of three in three years—that’s reason enough for such literature.” The same request was made by a third: “I am a mother of five children, oldest being 7 years. I am 25 years old. We live on the farm, but owing to sickness we haven’t got on very well.” Because the sale, distribution, and advertisement of contraceptives was illegal, Canadian women were understandably discreet in broaching the birth control issue.
Many turned to friends for help, sounded out sympathetic doctors or wrote covertly to birth control advocates outside the country for practical contraceptive advice. But written evidence of "ordinary" Canadians discussing the desire to limit family size—perhaps the most important social transformation to occur in twentieth-century Canada—is rarely found. For this reason the letters printed by Violet McNaughton in the woman's page of The Western Producer in 1927 are of particular interest. McNaughton, an active political progressive and feminist, was convinced that the health of women and children was influenced by family size and used her column to elicit the support of her readers. Their letters provide a rare "snapshot" of Canadian views on birth control in the interwar years.

The spate of birth control correspondence began 6 January 1927 when McNaughton published a letter of Carl Axelson, a left-leaning resident of Bingville, Alberta, who argued that it was "of the utmost importance that people about to get married should seriously consider fitness, responsibility and possibilities of correct mating." Axelson complained that those seeking information on reproduction often had to fall back on "quackery" and blamed politicians for this state of affairs.

They have enacted laws prohibiting the spread of sex knowledge. Some of the best books on the subject are banned in Canada. The result of this gross stupidity is that thousands of women, for lack of better knowledge are reduced to mere instruments of child-bearing, followed by such grave and fatal results that often force these unfortunate mothers and offspring into untimely graves, and in a general way tend to reduce the health and vigor of the race.

Axelson's liberal use of quotation marks revealed the newness of the vocabulary with which Canadians of the 1920s rationalized the limitation of births.

By sex knowledge and contraceptive means of "birth control," wellbeing and happiness can be greatly augmented in married lives. It will make possible "voluntary motherhood." Each child then would be a true "love child" over which the parents, from the very beginning, could exercise influence and guidance. This would liberate each home from the haunting fear which today has such a detrimental effect on both mothers and offspring.

Axelson located his defense of birth control in the context of peace, eugenics, and public health; his views clearly struck a chord. The peace issue was taken up again on 20 January when Letitia Krips wrote declaring that she and a friend agreed that, "there is no use in raising large families to provide 'cannon fodder': also the haphazard way of bringing children into the world at the present time does not make for the best citizenship." Still another writer suggested that the upper classes actually sought to keep the working class in ignorance of
contraception: "The priest requires large flocks, the militarist cheap cannon fodder, and the exploiter cheap labor."\(^7\)

The eugenic notion, touched on by Axelson and Krips, that women had a "duty" to produce only healthy children was also commonly expressed between the wars. "I.M.E." in a letter of 10 February asked:

Do you think it would rob marriage of any of its beauty or sanctity to have our young people taught that they may co-operate with the creator (and I write reverently) in providing more perfect specimens of the human species; more perfect physically, more perfect mentally, and more perfect spiritually? And I would go further, and impress upon every young person his or her duty in this respect. Professor Huxley says we use greater care in the raising of our domestic animals than we do in raising humans.\(^8\)

Sophia Dixon, later to be one of the founding members of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), sounded the same note in expressing the hope that clinics would be established to provide such information. "I think attention to a balanced diet, cleanliness, proper heating and ventilation, rest, recreation and sex education, including a practical knowledge of birth control for married adults would prevent many ailments ever appearing at all."\(^9\) Eugenics—purportedly the science of race betterment—was to be turned by the Nazis in the late 1930s to horrific ends. But in the 1920s it conjured up for most Canadians the idea of improving the health of children by medical inspections, preventing the entry into the country of diseased aliens, and prohibiting the marriages of couples who were believed likely to produce defective offspring.\(^10\) Although many eugenicists opposed birth control because they feared it would limit the fertility of the "fit," a number of McNaughton’s supporters clearly believed eugenics provided a rationale for birth control.

In opening the woman’s column of The Western Producer to the discussion of birth control, McNaughton provided prairie women with a rare opportunity to voice their concerns. Many readers like Winnifred McLeod were obviously frustrated with the lack of open discussion.

I heard a woman remark of a couple who were anticipating or dreading a newcomer: "What another, why the last two aren’t paid for yet." Now keep your seats and face facts; in almost every district there are one or two such families. The doctors would advise them, but their hands are tied (I quote a doctor there) by legislation, and every woman has a vote.\(^11\)

McLeod hoped that at the new health clinics "information would be provided so that every child is a welcomed child." Similar views were held by a mother of 12 who made the curious but, for a prairie woman, apt comparison of birth control with the Wheat Pool. Both were, to her way of thinking, innovative strategies that might offend the old-fashioned but could only make life better.
Give us birth control by all means. I am too old for it to do me any good, except for seeing my boys and girls not going through the same thing. . . . First, the suffering, then the worry, also the financial worry, over which, we have no control unless we are endowed with a certain amount of this world's goods. But that cannot save us women the pain and all that goes with it. But the restriction of fertility was not, as McNaughton's correspondents tended to believe, a new, twentieth-century phenomenon. Demographers have discovered that Canadian fertility began its long-term decline at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. It dropped about 30 percent between 1851 and 1891. The fall was offset, to an extent, at the turn of the century by the arrival of the young, prolific immigrants of southern and eastern Europe. Following the First World War, however, the Canadian decline in births matched that of other western nations. The size of completed families fell from an average of 4.1 children for parents born in 1871, to 2.9 children for parents born in 1911. The lowest point in the interwar fertility slump came during the Depression when the possibility of an additional child posed a serious threat to working-class households. Fertility rates were higher in French-Catholic than in English-Protestant regions, but no group was immune from falling natality.

Although a great many Canadians used some form of birth control in the early twentieth century, few were prepared to defend such practices publicly. An anonymous contributor to The Western Producer who signed "Another of the Tempted" protested that "anything that advocates and promotes birth control, or that stimulates the circulation thereof, should not be allowed to appear in our paper. Information of this kind should be left to doctors to administer in cases where necessary and permissible in a moral sense." Doctors might have been expected to understand the subject best, but at the turn of century were, in part because of the desire to enhance the profession's respectability, among the fiercest public opponents of restriction of family size. They were joined by those who saw birth control as both a cause and effect of the modern threats of urbanization, rural depopulation, alien immigration, and feminism. By the 1920s such opposition was beginning to wane, but doctors were still very cautious. "Doctors are sometimes totally ignorant," reported a midwife, "others have knowledge, but are not plucky enough to be honest about it, then again, there are the 'John Blunts' who will give you a plain answer if the patient will ask a straight question."

Whether or not such questions were asked in the 1920s, more and more Canadian women sought to limit their fertility. Rural fertility fell as optimism in the future of agriculture was checked. In towns the growth in female non-domestic occupations played a role to the extent of offering women a meaningful alternative to that of devoting their
lives to the raising of large families. The extension of compulsory education in English Canada was an equally important economic factor inasmuch as it increased the costs of raising children and limited the financial contribution they could make to the household.17 Motherhood was focussed increasingly on child-rearing and less on child-bearing. Women had, of course, always loved their children but the fewer they had, the greater the expectation was that their involvement with them would be emotionally charged. This desire for closeness was captured in one of McNaughton’s readers’ assertion, “Parents and children should be pals. With large families this is impossible.”18 The twentieth-century idealized image of the married couple which focussed on companionship rather than patriarchy was also difficult to reconcile with numerous children underfoot. The modern woman turned to birth control, not out of some selfish desire for “freedom,” but to fulfill the increasingly demanding duties of loving wife and doting mother.19

How were births limited? The provision of birth control information was criminalized by the 1892 Criminal Code. In her 24 March 1927 column, McNaughton printed in full the first article of section 207.

Everyone is guilty of an indictable offense and liable to two years imprisonment who knowingly without lawful justification or excuse offers to sell, advertise, publishes an advertisement or has for sale or disposal any means or instructions or any medicine, drug or article intended or represented as a means of preventing conception or of causing abortion or miscarriage.20

Canadian women accordingly placed considerable reliance on “natural” contraceptive methods such as abstinence, prolonged nursing which did provide some with a margin of protection against a subsequent conception, and restriction of intercourse to what was believed to be the “safe period” in the woman’s ovulation cycle. Unfortunately, nineteenth-century doctors concluded that the “safe period” was at mid-month; even the correct cycle announced by medical scientists in the 1920s failed often enough to win it the sobriquet of “Vatican roulette.” Of the “artificial” means of contraception, douching, carried out with syringes ordered from the Eaton’s catalogue, provided an awkward and inadequate method of protection. Some enterprising prairie women exchanged recipes for more effective soluble cocoa butter and quinine suppositories. Rubber diaphragms and condoms were available, but the necessity of fitting the former and the expense of the latter restricted their use to the middle classes. The evidence suggests that in Canada as elsewhere coitus interruptus or withdrawal was until the late 1930s the main method of contraception.21

After alluding to the frustration of couples who had to rely on abstinence or coitus interruptus, a contributor to The Western Producer
turned to the subject of abortion: "Then there are the many who resort to methods of abortion which are both unhygienic and shocking to the nervous systems of sensitive women. For these people improved methods of contraception would be a blessing." Because the most common methods of contraception were to a greater or lesser extent lacking in reliability, many married women who were firm in their desire to limit family size eventually had to face the serious decision of whether or not to seek an abortion. In the interwar years, abortion was intimately linked to family planning, fulfilling the role of a "back-up method" of birth control. The women who sought abortions were typically married mothers concerned for their own and their family's health and well-being. Of course, single women who found themselves with an undesired and unexpected conception had equally pressing reasons to terminate a pregnancy.

When a male opponent of family limitation wrote to *The Western Producer* calling for a defense of the unborn child, a female contributor immediately responded.

Your correspondent's letter in "defense of the unborn child" made me smile. Allow me to thank him on behalf of the unborn. But why ask mothers of eight or more if they would give one away. Why not ask one of the eight whether or not they would like a change of parents or home conditions into which they had been thrust willy-nilly without any consideration of how things may look from their angle? We hear a lot about fundamental principles, but such things have a peculiar habit of disappearing under investigation. Canadian women continued to hold the traditional view that until the fetus "quickened" at about three months, life was not present and they therefore had the right to take whatever measures they saw fit.

Women first resorted to traditional methods. A woman tried to "put herself right" by drinking an infusion of some natural "abortifacient" such as quinine, tansy, pennyroyal, savin, or ergot of rye. She could then try bleedings, hot baths, and violent exercises. After this might come the dangerous attempt at dilating the cervix with slippery elm, a sponge tent or catheter. All else failing, the classified columns of local papers listed a variety of patent medicines and names of nurses and doctors willing to assist women to "remove an obstruction."

"When Miss McPhail [Agnes McPhail, Canada's first woman Member of Parliament] spoke in our district recently," reported one of McNaughton's correspondents who signed herself "Lydia's Daughter," "she told us that in Canada four mothers die in childbirth every day. This is terrible to me. If children were only born when the mothers were in good health and strength, or had the means of properly providing for mother and child, so many mothers would not die." Because abortion was illegal, women often had to have recourse to ineffective and dangerous methods. A high price was accordingly paid
in maternal disease and death. Whereas the infant mortality rate fell dramatically in the first third of this century, the maternal mortality rate actually went up. In 1947, a woman Member of Parliament lamented the fact that whereas everyone knew that 47,000 Canadians were killed in the Second World War, few knew that 21,000 women had died in childbirth since 1926. As many as 4,000 resulted from bungled abortions.28

The argument that only the provision of effective contraceptives would lower the abortion rate was made by Marie Stopes in England and Margaret Sanger in the United States. McNaughton sought to popularize their views in Canada and was clearly successful.29 In August 1927 the newly married “W.S.L.” wrote McNaughton to ask:

I would like to know if you could give me either the address, or the publisher’s address of Dr. Marie Stopes, the authority on birth control. Also if you have any literature on the subject, I would be very grateful for same. We want healthy children at well-spaced periods and not many of them. It is pitiful to see the dozens of unwanted youngsters some unfortunate women have.30

In September another woman promised that “if the crop comes through safely I shall take a few dollars to get Dr. Marie Stopes’ books.”31

Given the dearth of birth control information in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, many Canadian women wrote directly to Marie Stopes in England or to Margaret Sanger in the United States.32 These two remarkable women knew that the middle classes safely restricted births, and in part because as social conservatives they were frightened by what they took to be the danger of growing fertility differentials, sought to make contraceptives available to the lower classes. Both stressed the need for government-supported clinics run by trained personnel. Most important, they downplayed the old economic arguments for birth control and asserted that limitation of family size had to appear not just economically necessary, but morally right and socially acceptable. They developed the argument that contraception was not only compatible with pleasure, but essential if the woman’s passions were to be allowed full expression. That this “feminist” defense of birth control proved successful was made clear by the echoes one finds of it in The Western Producer.

Women can have no freedom or equality until they own their own bodies. A woman should not become a mother except through her own choice. A woman can scarcely take an intelligent interest in public affairs when her mind is filled from month to month with distressing doubts and fears as to her possible or probable condition, or when she is overworked trying to provide the bare physical necessities for numerous children to whom society will never do justice, or worse still when she is burdened with invalid children as children often become in crowded families.33
Birth control promised, wrote "A.P." in her June letter to The Western Producer, to raise rather than lower the esteem in which motherhood was held.

Parenthood calls for more than giving birth to individuals, it asks something more splendid than this. Women who just have a family because they "can't help it" are not worthy to be mothers.... Until folks learn to discuss sex questions in a clean minded way, there will always be "the poor little accidentals."34

A school teacher who signed "E.E.H." agreed. The undernourished and poorly clothed children of the larger immigrant families, she reported, often could not keep up with their school mates. Their mothers were either too poor to seek the services of doctors or could not speak English well enough to ask the appropriate questions.

What can these poor ignorant women do? Why cannot there be some way by which birth control may be advocated? People should have only as many children as can be properly cared for. Otherwise they do a great wrong: every child, rich or poor, has a right to a sound body and mind. ... A mother's work is a noble work, that of moulding the men and women of tomorrow. It requires knowledge. So often it's a fight alone and in the dark. Shall we not lend them a helping hand?35

But in the 1920s such information was not readily available. Marie Stopes' publications were not, McNaughton reported, allowed through the Canadian mail.36 "If birth control information was obtainable in an open manner," argued Letitia Krips, "it would be used in a scientific manner and the information would relieve the people who need it the most. As it is, there is untold misery going on in the world that could be avoided."37 "Interested" protested in a letter of 24 January 1927 that "telling how to prevent conception in a clean and healthful way is illegal, the crime (?) being punishable with an exceedingly heavy jail sentence and an enormous fine."38 Nevertheless McNaughton distributed to interested readers pamphlets such as "New Health," "Birth Control," and "The Youth Problem."39 She appears not to have known that as a result of a cross-Canada lecture tour by Margaret Sanger in 1923, a small group of socialist feminists created the Canadian Birth Control League in Vancouver. This was followed in 1932 by the establishment of a birth control clinic. Socialist feminists who would later join the CCF such as Dorothy Steeves, Laura Jamieson, Lyle Telford, and A. M. Stephen were the most active champions of the right of working men and women to control their own fertility.

Not all socialists or feminists were so outspoken. Some late nineteenth-century feminists feared that birth control, far from being liberating, would simply further subject them to men's sexual
demands. Traces of such sentiments emerged in letters to the press that insisted if one did not intend to have children one should remain single. Some leftists were wary of taking the population question too seriously for fear of reinforcing the old Malthusian theory that social improvement could only be achieved by restricting the growth of population. Sophia Dixon noted the concern that birth control could lead to "race suicide." She concluded nevertheless that Canada’s "faulty system of distribution of wealth" was to blame if parents sought to avoid reproducing. She pointed to Russia as a society in which schemes were established of "social assistance for mothers, aiming to give all children necessary support, not in the spirit of charity but because the state considers it good business." 40 "Another of the Tempted" suggested that the birth control discussion had been launched to distract the public from the real cause of poverty—capitalism.

As far as I can see, it is not so much those who live in poor circumstances that promote Birth Control, but rather the well-to-do classes and those that want the privileges married life offers without accepting the adequate responsibilities. Such have no right to marry. That is proper birth control. 41

"Oldest of Twelve" agreed: "It's mostly the ones who are too selfish to give up a little of their own pleasure to raise their families who want birth control." 42 But such views did not predominate in the columns of The Western Producer. More typical was the response of "One of Thirteen":

I thought that the prairie atmosphere was especially conducive to clear thinking and vigorous personality, but a perusal of the letters from those who apparently fear temptation, wake me up with a jolt into—Is it the Dark Ages? The "Hush Hush" attitude regarding such "unspeakable" subjects as Birth Control and Short Skirts. Is it Canada, and in Saskatchewan that we are living or are we deluding ourselves and wending our weary and dismal way amid the physical and mental confines of Constantinople? 43

The birth control discussions that took place in The Western Producer in 1927 marked a milestone. The paper never again devoted as much attention to the issue of birth control. Some readers had been offended by the appearance of such "trash" in the woman’s column. But with the coming of the Depression most Canadians came to accept birth control as at least offering the prospect of some improvement in the health of mothers and some protection for the working-class family’s economy. In 1929 the women’s branch of the Saskatchewan section of the United Farmers of Canada petitioned the government to provide birth control information. The Seventh Labour Women’s Social and Economic Conference which met in Winnipeg in 1930 became a forum for Beatrice Brigden, a pioneer sex educator, to defend voluntary
motherhood. In 1933 the United Farm Women of Alberta called for a lifting of the ban on birth control.44

The subsequent history of the provision of birth control services in Canada between the 1930s and 1980s can be quickly sketched. The Depression, in raising fears of working-class unrest and racial degeneration, led some eastern businessmen, club women, academics, and clergy in the 1930s to call for a curbing of working-class fertility. The respectability of birth control was assured once the middle classes came out in its defense. The Reverend A. H. Tyrer with Dr. Rowena Hume and the Reverend Lawrence Skey established in Toronto in 1930 the Marriage Welfare Bureau, where couples were steered to doctors willing to provide contraceptive instruction. In Hamilton, Ontario club women led by Mrs. Mary Hawkins set up a birth control clinic in 1932 under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw.45 A. R. Kaufman, a Kitchener, Ontario, businessman after comparing notes with Tyrer and Hawkins, created the Parent’s Information Bureau to spread contraceptive information across Canada. Kaufman thought the diaphragm too fussy a method for most working-class women to employ regularly, and a clinic too remote and forbidding an institution for most to visit. He opted for less reliable but simpler forms of protection—contraceptive jellies and condoms. And rather than wait for women to visit clinics, he sent nurses out across the country to track down prospective clients.46 By 1942, he had over 70 nurses working from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland, contacting families that sent in over 120,000 applications for contraceptive supplies.

Kaufman took as much pride in establishing the legality of birth control propaganda. Article two of section 207 of the Criminal Code that made illegal the selling or advertising of contraceptives contained an escape clause.

No one shall be convicted of any offence in the section mentioned if he proves that the public good was served by the acts alleged to have been done, and that there was no excess in the acts alleged, beyond what the public good required.

When one of Kaufman’s workers was arrested in 1936 in the small Ontario town of Eastview, Kaufman’s lawyer used this article to mount a successful defense. In theory the distribution of contraceptives remained illegal, but in fact it was no longer subjected to police harassment.

Quebec produced few public proponents of birth control. Nevertheless its fertility did decline, though in relative terms it still appeared frighteningly high to some English Canadians. It dropped dramatically after the Second World War once the economy and the prevailing culture ceased to encourage large families. The “Quiet Revolution” of the early 1960s saw the secularization of Quebec society, marked by the
passing of responsibility for schools and hospitals from church to state. French-Canadian fertility fell below that of English Canadians and even practising Catholics accepted the need of the new contraceptive pill.47

In 1969 the law finally caught up with these social changes; the Criminal Code was amended so that the provision of contraceptives ceased to be illegal. But the new law permitted abortions to take place only in hospitals, and only when approved by a medical committee. This led to glaring disparities: in some provinces committees readily permitted abortions, while in others such as Prince Edward Island, they were refused altogether. The campaign for the repeal of the abortion law was launched by second wave feminists just as the campaign for the legalization of contraception was concluded.

The debate between opponents and supporters of abortion, the so-called pro-life and pro-choice forces, is sometimes so fierce that it was easy to forget that for over a century Canadian women have shown enormous tenacity and courage in seeking to control their fertility. The women who wrote to The Western Producer in the 1920s would no doubt be impressed by the changes made by the 1990s; they would also recognize the fact that for some control of one’s body remains “a fight alone and in the dark.”

NOTES

1 The Western Producer, 29 September 1927, p. 12; 27 October 1927, p. 12; 10 November 1927, p. 12.
2 Harris Turner established The Western Producer in Saskatoon in 1925 as the mouthpiece of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association. Violet McNaughton (née Jackson), editor of its woman’s page, was born in England, trained as a teacher at the University of London, and came to Saskatchewan in 1909 where she married an active supporter of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association, John McNaughton. On her peace, suffrage, and medical interests see Grant MacEwen, . . . And Mighty Women Too: Stories of Notable Western Canadian Women (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1975), p. 175-77; Rudolph George Marchildon, “The Woman’s Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association: A Study in Agrarian Activism,” MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1981.
4 Axelson spoke before farm and labor gatherings on population questions. (See The Worker, 20 June 1925, p. 3.)
5 The Western Producer, 6 January 1927, p. 12.
6 The Western Producer, 20 January 1927, p. 12.
7 The Western Producer, 24 February 1927, p. 12.
8 The Western Producer, 10 February 1927, p. 12; and see also Beta Ray, “Human Nature,” The Western Producer, 31 March 1927, p. 12.
9 The Western Producer, 16 June 1927, p. 12.
11 The Western Producer, 7 July 1927, p. 12.
24 *The Western Producer*, 1 September 1927, p. 12.
27 *The Western Producer*, 1 September 1927, p. 12.
30 The Western Producer, 11 August 1927, p. 12.
31 The Western Producer, 24 February 1927, p. 12.
32 The Western Producer, 1 September 1927, p. 12.
33 The Western Producer, 24 February 1927, p. 12.
34 The Western Producer, 2 June 1927, p. 12.
35 The Western Producer, 9 June 1927, p. 12.
36 The Western Producer, 11 August 1927, p. 12; McNaughton provided the addresses of Stopes’ British and American publishers in her column of 22 September 1927, p. 12.
37 The Western Producer, 20 January 1927, p. 12; see also Krips’ series of articles entitled “Women: Past and Present” that appeared in *The Western Producer* in 1926.
38 The Western Producer, 24 February 1927, p. 12.
39 The Western Producer, 7 April 1927, p. 12.
40 The Western Producer, 3 March 1927, p. 12.
41 The Western Producer, 7 July 1927, p. 12-13; and see the same writer’s letter of 25 August 1927.
42 The Western Producer, 28 July 1927, p. 12.
43 The Western Producer, 14 July 1927, p. 12.
