


BOOK REVIEW

## Laura Kelly, *Contraception and Modern Ireland: A Social History, c. 1922–92*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 350. ISBN 978-1-108-96977-2. \$89.99 (hardcover).

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The last several years have seen a growth in scholarship examining the history of contraception and abortion in modern Ireland. The works of Cara Delay on the history of abortion in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, Lindsey Earner Byrne and Diane Urquhart on the abortion journey and a new monograph by one of Ireland's foremost historians, Mary E. Daly, on fertility control in twentieth-century Ireland have greatly expanded our understanding of these complex histories. This monograph by Laura Kelly of the University of Strathclyde is a significant contribution to the field and adds substantially to the study of social history in Ireland and Britain. Kelly's book explores contraception in Ireland across a seventy-year period, from the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 to the Health (Family Planning) Amendment Act of 1992. She explores access to contraception for different generations, sexual knowledge and morality, birth control practices and the impact of the Pill, the significant influence of the Catholic Church both locally and through papal encyclicals, feminist and family-planning activism, and the development of the pro-life movement in response to concerns about increases access to birth control and abortion. The monograph arises from a Wellcome Trust research fellowship and the extensive reading and research that has driven the work is very evident.

Unlike the works of Daly and Delay, Kelly uses oral-history methodologies alongside archival research. She persuasively argues for the value of oral history in assisting the pursuit of the history of experience and for integrating women into historical scholarship (p. 13). It presents opportunities and challenges for a topic of such an intimate private nature, which can be rendered invisible in the written record. Kelly is interested in the experiences of men and women as they navigated family planning and birth control access across this period of change. Previous works have focused more on policy reform, or the work of activist organizations, and Kelly's key contribution is the bottom-up approach that centres the voices of ordinary men and women who were of fertile age in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. She conducted interviews with thirty men and seventy-three women born before 1955 about their experiences with birth control and family planning. These came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and almost all were or had been married. Kelly is reflective on her methodology and its gaps and limitations, together with her own positionality as interviewer. The candid nature of the conversations is evident in the quotes extracted in the volume. Kelly perceptively notes that her interviews coincided with or followed soon after the Irish abortion referendum in 2018 which had resulted in greater openness in telling stories about reproductive

experiences. Public as well as academic interest in the history of fertility control and abortion restriction has surged in the years since.

While the most interesting and original sections of the book focus on the ordinary everyday experience of individuals, Kelly has also interviewed forty-two former activists and some priests and former members of the medical profession, enabling her to also write a nuanced history of the movement for birth control reform. The discussions of policy and activism tread more familiar ground but there is some interesting analysis of priests and doctors and their varying views on contraception. Kelly has previously published two excellent monographs on the history of the medical profession in Ireland and her expertise in medical history is used to her advantage.

Kelly is careful not to overstate the influence of the women's liberation movement, but she nevertheless finds many examples of women exercising agency and resistance in their decisions regarding their families and health. Irish women began to resist the power and authority of the Catholic Church and the state to control their bodies and helped to bring about significant reforms. Similarities can be drawn with the work of Kate Fisher, and Kelly acknowledges the influence of Fisher's work. Interestingly, Kelly's conclusions differ from Fisher's regarding responsibility for contraception in the family. Fisher's oral-history interviews revealed that men typically took responsibility for procuring contraception while Kelly's work highlights the importance of female networks and the role of women in managing such matters and circumventing state and Church restrictions. Change was slow to achieve, however, and Kelly concludes that Ireland did not experience a sexual revolution until the 1990s, despite some progress evident in the 1979 Family Planning Act. She notes the enduring legacies of shame and stigma around sexual matters in Irish society.

This book focuses primarily on contraceptive use within marriages, and it does not dwell on the experience of women and girls grappling with unwanted pregnancies outside marriage. However, this book has nevertheless much to offer those seeking to understand the history of Ireland's incarceration of women whose children were born in the wrong circumstances. Access to abortion services and birth control remain of significant relevance internationally and it is encouraging to learn that Kelly's next monograph will focus specifically on the abortion debates in the 1980s and 1990s.

The book deserves a wide readership and will be of interest to scholars, students and the general public. Open-access availability (funded by the Wellcome Trust) will expand its audience, but there remains value in having a physical copy to peruse. Cambridge University Press have done an excellent job with the production, and it includes several images of propaganda material and advertisements together with photographs which illustrate the arguments. Kelly is to be commended for this engrossing study, which represents the most comprehensive history of contraception in modern Ireland.