

ABORTION THEN AND NOW:  
NEW ZEALAND ABORTION STORIES FROM 1940–1980  
*By Margaret Sparrow*  
Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010. 304 pp. RRP \$50  
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*Reviewed by*  
Sarah Donovan

This is an important book for those with a general interest in the cultural politics of reproduction, and more specifically, intersections of embodied experience, law, medicine and moral values.

As a collection of personal abortion stories and historical commentary charting the path between New Zealand's past and present abortion law, the book is ground-breaking in two respects. Firstly, as a text marking, as Sparrow suggests, '40 years of change' of abortion law and practice in New Zealand, it is an unprecedentedly comprehensive chronicle of the local history of abortion and the cultural 'landscape' within which the current law evolved from a time when unsafe, illegal abortion was the only option available to women seeking to end unwanted pregnancies. This overview draws on a wide range of secondary and primary sources, including medical reports and news stories from the various eras, as well as interviews with clinicians, police and advocates of access to abortion. Secondly, the book is unique in presenting an 'insider' perspective on abortion in NZ during this period through the presentation of a collection of personal accounts. While the intention to foreground abortion as a hidden experience during this era clearly lies at the heart of this project, both aspects of the book contribute to the achievement of an impressively nuanced historical account of abortion in New Zealand. The result is a text which effectively makes a case for experiential accounts to be duly recognised as among the many 'stories' of abortion – legislative, medical, cultural, and personal.

The book is cohesively structured, in a way which sympathetically recognises the entwined nature of these various accounts; the juxtaposition of historical data with more personal material is surprisingly complementary. The 'abortion

stories' are grouped into historic eras within five key chapters covering the 1940s to the 1980s, with each of these chapters preceded by an introductory essay detailing key relevant medical, legal and criminal issues relevant to each decade. This information provides extremely useful context for the personal accounts which follow. Additional chapters present accounts from police, doctors and advocates for abortion law reform, as well as vignettes of particular individuals of historical significance. However, it is the personal accounts of abortion decisions which are the most compelling aspect of the book, and these anchor the complexity of the other material in a way which increases the overall accessibility of the historic data.

In the 1940s, the point at which the book begins its historical overview, abortion in New Zealand was defined legally as a serious criminal offence, and medically as a major public health concern on moral grounds. This moral conservatism is illustrated in the report of a 1936 government committee of inquiry into abortion, the committee members noting that while allowing abortion to be performed by medical practitioners might reduce deaths from illegal abortions, 'we do not accept this as any justification of a procedure which is associated with grave moral and physical dangers'(p.2). The chapters focussing on the 1940s and 50s paint a grim picture of the risks involved in obtaining an abortion, an era in which an astonishing number of New Zealand women died as a consequence of unsafe abortion. These deaths peaked between 1940 and 1945 with 112 deaths during this period. Deaths from abortion usually resulted from infection from the introduction of unsterile instruments and substances into the uterus, the consequence of which was frequently localised infection and haemorrhage spreading to overwhelming blood poisoning (septicaemia). As a number of harrowing examples within this chapter illustrate, this was often a lingering and miserable death, at a time when life-saving antibiotics were not yet available. One particularly distressing case is that of a Mrs M, aged 24 of Dunedin, who was admitted to hospital with infection, dying 49 days later in spite of multiple surgeries and other treatments.

The accounts of a number of people who performed abortions during these four decades are also included in the book, giving unprecedented insight into the motivations of those prepared to flout the law of the time. One particularly striking account is made by an interviewee recorded as '60/71' (her prisoner number), a 27-year-old midwife imprisoned in 1970 for her role in performing abortions on two women who had approached her with unwanted pregnancies. As a trained health professional with knowledge of infection control and access to sterile medical instruments, she explains that she felt compelled to assist the women who would likely otherwise have resorted to even less safe methods.

She did not take money for her service. Arrested after being entrapped by police, she was sentenced to 12 months in Mt Eden Prison, serving around seven and a half months. Such accounts are extremely sobering to the extent that they problematise the automatic vilification of the ‘backstreet abortionist’ as necessarily motivated by ill intent and pecuniary gain. In different ways, the cases of both Mrs M and 60/71 give dramatic insights into the climate of secrecy, stigma and fear which surrounded abortion in this era. By the 1960s and 70s, continued lack of access to safe abortion resulted in many New Zealand women travelling to Australia for abortions. Eventually public opinion and the views of a minority of politicians came to a head in 1974 when New Zealand’s first abortion clinic (Auckland Medical Aid Centre) was opened to offer safe medical abortions to New Zealand women, in contravention of the existing law. This was the catalyst for eventual legislative change with the amendment of the Crimes Act and the passing of the Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977 (and its subsequent amendment in 1978).

The historical overview provided by these chapters usefully contextualises the current legislation governing abortion in New Zealand. The grounds for legal abortion continue to be contained within the Crimes Act 1961. The Act requires several clinicians to certify that failure to provide an abortion would cause serious harm to a woman’s physical or mental health. (I was surprised to learn that rape is not automatic grounds for abortion in New Zealand.) Beyond these specific criteria, abortion is a criminal offence in New Zealand, and as noted in the Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act, is not permitted to be a matter entirely ‘for the woman and a doctor to decide’.

This stipulation might surprise some people, the spirit of which, I would suggest, may well be in tension with mainstream popular expectations that in 2011 a woman with an unwanted pregnancy ought not to *need* to demonstrate mental collapse to her doctor in order to access an abortion in this country. Given that abortion is a relatively common medical procedure in New Zealand (performed approximately 18,000 times per year according to Statistics New Zealand (2009) there is clearly, as Sparrow’s book ultimately suggests, a broader ongoing tension between what is and is not technically permitted by law, and current ‘real world’ practice. In linking the past with the present, the book thus draws attention to a number of important tensions among the different domains (legal, medical, cultural) which impact on, and are impacted by, abortion as it is currently practised. While unsafe backstreet abortions may be a thing of the past, current access to abortion nonetheless appears to rely rather tenuously on the willingness of those undertaking the procedure – in this case clinicians – to navigate what can only be considered a legal ‘grey area’.

If, as Sparrow suggests, health professionals are reluctant to get involved in commenting on such issues (somewhat understandably), the question of the legal status of abortion in New Zealand seems an especially important site of ongoing social scientific commentary and critique, and the book usefully lays a path for this, as well as for further local qualitative research into experiences relating to abortion.

*Abortion Then and Now* assumes a 'pro-choice' perspective on abortion, and this is made explicit from the outset. However, this is essentially a historical document, with minimal use of editorial 'voice' throughout. It is clear that the primary intention is to shed light on the personal and social costs of the legal prohibition of abortion prior to 1978 as a previously hidden aspect of New Zealand history. However, the book does, in its introduction, also present itself as a platform for legislative review. Independently of this stated intention, the trajectory of the book from 'then' to 'now' certainly presents compelling evidence for the need to recognise that access to abortion in New Zealand continues to be a contested issue. This link between past and present is reiterated in the concluding sentence of the book: 'The theme of this book is that unsafe, self-induced, and illegal abortions must never be allowed to return and safe, humane medical services of a high standard must be provided within New Zealand.' (p.283) Such statements draw attention to the importance of recognising a critical distinction between supporting access to safe abortion and being 'pro-abortion', a distinction which those with a wholesale moral objection to abortion seem intent to blur.

A key strength of the book lies, I believe, in the extent to which the use of personal stories 'grounds' the issue of abortion, in revealing the wish to end an unwanted pregnancy as, first and foremost, an embodied experience which indisputably 'belongs to' individual women. Presenting these stories as authoritative in their own right bypasses the well-known moral debates about abortion, which are not reprised or critiqued in the book. This arguably creates a moral space within which readers are left to draw their own conclusions. Letting such data more or less 'speak for itself' is of course a hallmark of qualitative research more generally, which is underpinned by a wish to seek to understand the ways people make sense of their experiences, being, as Silverman (1993: 170) suggests 'especially interested in how ordinary people observe and describe their lives'. The benefit of this approach is that it puts a human face to a phenomenon more commonly described in abstract terms, for example in the form of statistics about abortion trends, analyses which inevitably decontextualise individual abortion decisions. As with the use of qualitative accounts in sociological studies of other areas of embodied experience and the ethics

of healthcare practices, these narratives surely ought to be recognised as a touchstone for intelligent debate on this issue.

Such stories also provide some balance to the narrative of regret and reactive depression following decisions which have historically characterised anti-abortion rhetoric. While many of these personal accounts make it clear that the decision to seek an abortion was far from an easy one or something taken lightly, what becomes clear is the extent to which such decisions were shaped by structural factors rather than being a 'choice' per se, with abortion seen as the best, or only, solution to hardships viewed as unbearable. Often this was the overwhelming social stigma around unmarried motherhood at the time. As one interviewee put it, abortion was the 'least worst' option available to her in the circumstances. The stories also show the significance of socioeconomic circumstances in abortion decisions, a fact likely to also have contemporary resonance, given that while abortion law in the UK recognises economic hardship as grounds for abortion, New Zealand law does not.

*Abortion Then and Now* offers an important contribution to Australasian studies of the politics of reproduction. This book reminds us of the hard-won gains made over a number of decades, by those who have been prepared to champion women's access to contraception and control of their own fertility in New Zealand. In recognising unwanted pregnancy as both a historical and contemporary experience, and signalling the precarious underpinnings of contemporary access to abortion, the significance of the book extends well beyond a history of the achievement of safe medical abortion in New Zealand.

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LANDSCAPES OF CARE:  
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY CAREGIVING

*By Andrew Power*

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The strong public visibility that family carers enjoy in 2011 was not always the case. Until the 1960s they had little recognition or support for their work caring for family members and trying to obtain the best possible services for them – if these existed. In fact, the general stereotype was that kinship ties were weak, especially for older people. But since Townsend (1957) disproved this assumption there has been a huge increase in research into many aspects of family care. Power's work makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on caregiving, with a macro focus across a broad spectrum of caregiving policies, linking them with disability legislation, and a microcosmic examination of carers for those with learning difficulties. His conceptualisation of carers over a complexity of landscapes shows what insights are gained from examining space and place generally and minutely, reminding me of Andrew Irving's (2005) work on the syntax of everyday practice.

The book is divided into three parts; in part I the chapters focus on the concept of family care itself, tracing the definition of carers within community care practice. It also includes a useful discussion of gender in caring and 'disability critiques of care'. In Part II, Power examines the care policies of three countries, England, the United States and Ireland. He then, in Part III, takes Ireland as a case study and focuses particularly on the socio-spatial experiences of carers – a practical issue which should concern everyone involved with carers and service delivery to the people cared-for and the carers themselves. Power engages thoroughly with the details of the subject. His overview of England shows a well-developed national concern for family care. This concern ensures good support systems and an effort to normalise the role of the family by sustaining their own independence. Ireland, with its Catholic family policy has more of

an ad hoc service provision and has only weak social rights for caregivers. For the US, Power comments on the increased recognition of carers during the recent Bush administration, but he says (p.110) that overall 'care management still is primarily focused on the care recipient, and generally fails to address the caregiver's needs.'

In Part II, Power compares the legislative and welfare systems of England, US and Ireland – detailing the discourses which have given rise to policies, for example those of institutional care and community care. He schematises these in tabular form for clarity of understanding, with a column for the particular discourse, a column for the related legislation, and one for a commentary. With this developmental representation of the legislative acknowledgement of carers' work, and the accompanying discourse showing the social perceptions, we can see the increasing visibility of carers and the recognition of them in terms of their rights as well as their responsibilities. Interesting and new! However, to my mind, of equal value and interest is his focus on the 'landscapes of care' of the home and public spaces. How caregivers of those with learning disabilities negotiate these is insightful, sensitive, and, again, I refer to anthropologist Andrew Irving (2005), and his work on negotiating space and time. Following Wiles (2003) who examines three spatial scales in caregiving: the body, the household, and beyond, Power talks about how caregiving 'shapes multiple aspects of a carer's life, including their daily geographies and everyday experiences' (p.189). He also observes how this can force a renegotiation of home, of mobility, of family and the carer's own identity, and of course, the renegotiation of public spaces.

Negotiating public space can be difficult for the carer, especially when shops are busy, buses are full, and traffic is flowing. Sometimes the carer can go out independently. Time is important, of not being away too long from the cared-for person, or, in taking the cared-for person out, the slow time of disability influences the place and time of outing. Even more to consider, however, is the reaction of others to the cared-for individual 'I'll never forget when she was a baby, we were in town that day, and I met a friend. And she just ignored the fact that I had a baby...just because she was Down's. I was distraught. I was shattered.' (p.199)

Public places are visible space, but the place of home is invisible. Things happen, but no one sees them. The carer is home-based not by choice, but by the needs of the person with disabilities, many of whom cannot be left for too long. Many can't be left alone at all. And, further, the cared-for person dislikes leaving the home and its security. So that leaving the home, with or without the

cared-for individual can be extremely difficult. Furthermore, customary socialising within the home is also difficult, even when friends do want to visit. Visitors are not always welcome because of upsetting the person with disabilities.

Isolation, says Power, is a significant threat. To counteract it, many families have deliberately and consciously developed networks of 'safe havens' (Pinfold, 2000), natural supports, for example, such as other family members, supportive neighbours and friends. Examples of safe havens are parent's organisations, clubs, or voluntary groups organised and run by parents of people with disabilities. These are again demonstrative of a complex geography or landscape of caring, transferable from the specific group of carers for those with learning disabilities, to a number of other caring areas.

Power creates the term 'caringspace' or therapeutic landscape to define what the parents are doing by creating safe areas for their family living, and, importantly, for themselves. 'The local landscape of care is remapped to incorporate these secure spaces'. Such secure spaces are also becoming available for older people with dementia, and for those with physical handicaps, many of which lead to isolation.

However it is a cogent argument that if (modern/western) society were more accommodating and understanding, it might be possible to widen these 'caringspaces' within mainstream areas which currently exclude, consciously or subconsciously. One example is the inclusion of older people with dementia in exercise groups, where group members help and guide the individual concerned. Powers' conclusion is as succinct as the rest of the book: he admits how difficult it is to generalise from one category of disability to the wider population, and likewise from one set of carers to another. But at the same time, he emphasises commonalities, such as the severe restrictions on hospitality and socialising at home, or the ability to move in and out of home at will. Much of his work is transferable to those with dementia, and to people with major physical handicaps.

Community care means that families need to be recognised for their value. Power provides the insight needed for better understanding of this value. He moves easily between welfare ideologies, practicalities and the minutiae of caring. And his theorising of space and place in the 'landscape' of care places him as one of the innovative theorists in caregiving research.



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EXTREME LANDSCAPES OF LEISURE:

NOT A HAP-HAZARDOUS SPORT

*By* Patrick Laviolette

Ashgate, Farnham, 2010. 226 pp. RRP \$127

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The aims of this volume are ambitious. Laviolette strives for an understanding of the multi-faceted connections between the body and the conscious, the social imagination, the landscape and the adventurer. He undertakes this exploration using ethnographic techniques, relating his adventures in extreme landscapes, and amongst risk-takers. He then applies phenomenological analysis to his findings. Phenomenology is a philosophical concept that has in recent times been gaining a certain degree of credibility amongst anthropologists, but might, perhaps, still be seen as a slightly eccentric choice of analysis, and he goes to some lengths to justify his choice. He explains that he is attempting an understanding of 'substantial experiential sensations which largely exist outside the linguistic realm – out of descriptive reach, just beyond the logical progression of words' (p.1). In order to write about something that is so difficult to articulate, he uses phenomenology as a means to analyse the things that he has observed in others, and experienced himself, for quite large sections of the book are auto-ethnographic. He is interested, as the title of the book suggests, not only in the activities of extreme adventurers themselves, but the landscapes in which these activities take place, and the ways in which 'sensation seekers... appropriate marginalised landscapes of fear and danger by personifying them with vernacular names and therefore associating them with their own particular causes' (p.178). The combination of phenomenological analysis of ethnographic material, and an interest in the landscapes of fear themselves make this a unique offering in this growing field within the social sciences.

Laviolette places these activities in context through a brief description of the history of risky undertakings, placing them in the tradition of colonial explorers and his research in the tradition of the early fieldwork of anthropologists

and writers such as Livingstone and Alfred Cort Haddon, thus tracing these activities to the beginnings of modernity. Having gained an historical context for these activities, he relates a series of adventures. These range from what can only be described as an extremely foolish unplanned excursion into the Cairngorms in Scotland, which nearly cost the author his life, to the considerably safer (at least physically) surroundings of a television studio, which, nonetheless, is ‘wrapped up in intricate historical dream of the risks and dangers of adventure seeking’ (p.71). He traverses these extremes via the Cornish cliffs where he has undertaken ethnographic work with cliffjumpers, becoming engaged in the activity himself, and the Surfers Against Sewage movement, a group with whom he plainly sympathises. An interesting chapter explores the ways that activities that were once considered marginal or the domain of the eccentrics of the Oxford Dangerous Sports Club, have now become part of the mainstream experience, and the significance that this has for the social imaginary with regard to risk. Lavolette describes the significance of the sub-culture of people who dedicate themselves to the rescue of others, sometimes the dedicated risk-takers described elsewhere, those who have ‘gone out too far, with too much machismo’ (p.94). He also explores the ritualising of hazardous behaviour, as part of his bid to understand the link between marginalised or extreme landscapes and extreme activities ‘to fully embody the environmental essence of landscapes where, increasingly, modern actors feel they are banished by modernity’ (p.160). The action of the book is also wide ranging in a geographic sense, from the Scottish Highlands to the beaches of Taranaki in New Zealand.

Lavolette’s book is engaging on a number of levels. On the most accessible and entertaining level, the first-hand accounts of his adventures, from which he derives the personal experience about which he writes, are entertaining and flow easily. These stories lend the book a feel of authenticity from a participants’ point of view. Such a high proportion of auto-ethnographic content could be seen as self-indulgent, but the book does not stray over that line. Lavolette is very much a participant in the extreme practices that he relates and so his stories ring true. Secondly, he adds significantly to the discourse relating to extreme activities, coming at it as he does from a consideration of the ways that these activities relate to the landscapes in which they take place. He unpacks the roles the physical locations play in the imaginary of both participants and the general public. ‘The hazardous use of landscape, when linked to positive encounters with danger, allows extreme acts to be interpreted beyond even the notions concerning performance [...] the dynamics governing them are far more complex than that. They are also about an intentional search for freedom through danger’ (p.177). Finally, Lavolette’s work is important because

of the analysis that he applies to his findings. As related earlier, in response to the difficulties in analysing activities, the result of which are experiences that are so difficult to articulate, he uses phenomenological analysis to make sense of his findings. As he writes; 'Bodily understanding and the knowledge that it produces through action are therefore essential elements when studying those types of adventures where fear and danger are prominent. The phenomenological perspective is one of the best suited for studying bodily sensations' (p.1). In this way he furthers the understanding of hazardous activities. If the book has a downside, I would have to say I found the introduction heavy going. This is out of character with the rest of the book, and perhaps stems from a desire to place the work theoretically before relating the substance of the volume's findings and arguments. Readers should consider beginning with chapter one, returning to the introduction once somewhat more familiar with the arguments of the book.

I would thoroughly recommend the book to those interested in the field of high-risk activities. The book has an edge of excitement about these adventures that is gained through the lens of a first person view, and the interest and intellectual depth of a philosophical analysis of those experiences. Add to this the analysis of the landscapes that provide the physical context for dangerous pursuits, and there is much that is new here for scholars to consider.