

“I Told Him My Condition He Gave Me Drugs”: Premarital Sexual Knowledge and Birth Control in Late Victorian Britain¹

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Abstract

In the United Kingdom, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a revolutionary social change when married couples began to exert more control over their fertility. Although moral prudery prevailed over the period, birth control information campaigns started to gain ground following the 1877 high-profile trial for obscenity of social reformers Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh. This research work explores a selection of late Victorian testimonies and excerpts from private correspondence submitted by petitioners to the London Foundling Hospital. The archives of this charitable organisation provide details of the circumstances surrounding out of wedlock pregnancies and allow researchers to witness certain aspects of the intimate lives of young unmarried couples from the working class. The article focuses on the question of sexual knowledge and on the different methods of fertility control people may have used or had access to at the time. Ultimately, it illustrates some of the harmful consequences of the absence of formal sex education in late Victorian Britain.

Un changement social révolutionnaire se profile au Royaume-Uni au cours des dernières décennies du XIX^e siècle lorsque les couples mariés commencent à mieux contrôler leur fertilité. Dans un contexte toujours empreint de pudibonderie, les campagnes d'information sur le contrôle des naissances gagnent enfin en popularité avec le procès retentissant des réformateurs sociaux Annie Besant et Charles Bradlaugh en 1877. Ce travail de recherche explore une sélection de témoignages et d'extraits de correspondances privées datant du dernier quart du XIX^e siècle et conservés dans les archives du London Foundling Hospital. Les documents de cette institution reflètent les circonstances qui entourent les grossesses hors mariage et dévoilent certains éléments de la vie intime de jeunes couples issus de milieux modestes. Il sera ici question des connaissances de ces jeunes gens en matière de sexualité et des différentes méthodes de contrôle de la fertilité auxquelles ils pouvaient avoir recours. L'article permettra notamment d'illustrer certaines conséquences négatives de l'absence d'éducation sexuelle formelle au Royaume-Uni à la fin de l'époque victorienne.

Keywords

contraception, birth control, premarital sex, late Victorian Britain, abortifacients, sexual knowledge, working-class couples, young adults
contraception, contrôle des naissances, relations sexuelles avant le mariage, le Royaume-Uni à la fin de l'époque victorienne, abortifs, connaissances en matière de sexualité, couples de la classe ouvrière, jeunes adultes

About a month before the baby was born, I remember asking my aunt where the baby would come from. She was astounded, and did not make me much wiser (Llewelyn 30).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, English married couples were increasingly able to control their fertility. While a woman who married in the 1860s had an average of six children, her granddaughters who married in the 1910s bore less than three (Anderson 28). Demographers and social historians pointed to a variety of factors to try and understand this major social change – from the spread of birth control information, with contraceptive devices becoming more easily available, to more conservative sexual behaviours being adopted as a consequence of the social purity campaigns and their calls for self-control and sexual continence, as well as factors such as social class, environment, culture². The aforementioned demographic trend

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² Social purity organisations such as the National Vigilance Association (1885) were formed in the United Kingdom in the wake of the scandal caused by the adoption of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Informed by religious beliefs, these organisations strove to put an end to prostitution and all other types of sexual activities

which affected all social classes was reportedly slower in working-class families (McLaren, *A History of Contraception* 178).

The topic at hand which revolves around young unmarried couples and their sexual knowledge during the last twenty-five years of Victoria's reign is inspired by the highly personal and intimate London Foundling Hospital archive collection. Known as one of the first British institutions dedicated to the care and protection of illegitimate children, the London Foundling Hospital was reputed for its highly selective admission procedure which aimed at assessing the merit of young unwed mothers according to a rigid set of moral standards. As historian Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen puts it, in the nineteenth century, the philanthropic institution became a sort of "icon" of Victorian "respectability" with young unwed mothers who wished to have their child admitted being asked to detail the circumstances which led to their illegitimate pregnancy (Sheetz-Nguyen 2)³. In the Foundling Hospital's archived files, a number of discourses collide. The unwed mothers' testimonies and the inquiry reports are archived alongside other more private documents – mostly excerpts of correspondence sent by the putative fathers – which some mothers managed to provide to press their case. The presence of first-hand unmediated documents becomes more visible in the archive collection after the 1870s for reasons linked to progress in elementary state education and to the decreasing rates of illiteracy⁴.

This study rests on an information-oriented selection of a total of 433 petition files for adoption presented at the London Foundling Hospital between 1875 and 1901⁵. In the selected cases, young unwed mothers and the men they identified as the fathers of their children, were almost invariably of humble social backgrounds. The women who are referred to as the "petitioners" in the files, worked as domestic servants for the most part (56.5%), but also as waitresses and hotel employees (5.7%) or as sales assistants (3.9%) and clerical workers (1.6%). Others were in textile and clothing, working as seamstresses, milliners or draper's assistants (10.6%). Factory workers were quite rare (1.3%). Some, from better-off families, had no employment, and were still at home, looking after their siblings or tenants (18.7%). The young men also worked as domestic servants (17%). Others were skilled craftsmen such as carpenters or bootmakers for instance (18.9%), or semi-skilled to low-skilled workers such as delivery boys or farm workers (17.7%). There were also coachmen, street sweepers, dock workers or window cleaners. Some worked in the hotel trade and restaurant industry (7.3%). Others were service

which they considered immoral. For more on the topic see Lucy Bland. "'Purifying' The Public World: Feminist Vigilantes in Late Victorian England." *Women's History Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1992. pp. 397-412.

³ From the columns of newspapers, to popular folklore or more official spheres such as local churches, or London's courts rooms, the massive influence of the flexible concept of "respectability" was unequivocal in Victorian society, although it had lost some of its influence by the end of Victoria's reign. The Foundling Hospital's ongoing focus on this highly sexualized concept of "respectability" as the main tool for selecting the recipients of their charitable help was no exception at the time.

⁴ After the adoption of the 1870 Elementary Education Act, the London School Board orchestrated the construction of 53 board schools in London in less than five years. Although the Act's main aim was to provide a minimum level of literacy for all children, one had to wait another ten years to see education made compulsory until the age of 10. In 1893, this was raised to the age of 12. By the end of the nineteenth century, illiteracy rates for both sexes had dropped dramatically: from around 40 percent of males and 60 percent of females in England and Wales in 1800, to only around 3 percent in 1900. For more information on education in late Victorian times see Amy J. Lloyd. "Education, Literacy and the Reading Public." *British Library Newspapers*. Gale, 2007. <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/amy-j-lloyd-education>.

⁵ The total amount of submitted petitions throughout the selected period is much higher with 2136 applicants being reported as having presented their petition before the committee between 1879 and 1901 (Foundling Hospital, A/FH/A/08 Secretary: Petitioners; 'Applications', undated document listing the number of cases processed and children admitted between 1879 and 1907). The selection process used for this research work consisted in selecting all the files containing first-hand unmediated documents mostly in the form of private romantic correspondence excerpts. In order to gather enough documents, the time frame was set in the last quarter of the century and spans a whole generation, the generation of people who were born between the years 1855 and 1880.

and retail workers (9.9%). The army, the police and naval officers were also represented (5.7%). Belonging to higher-ranking social echelons from the lower middle class were the men who worked as clerical workers (6.9%), along with those who were working in finance or had their own business (1.6%). 3.6% of the putative fathers from the sample were said to be middle-class professionals such as architects, journalists, surgeons and detectives.

This article will inquire into the sexual knowledge of young people whose intimate lives are reflected in the selected archival records. It will illustrate some of the harmful consequences of the absence of formal sex education at a time when sexuality, although silenced and relegated to tabooed margins, had also become, as Michel Foucault puts it, a public issue: “Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it” (27). In spite of obvious limitations linked to the representativity of the corpus at hand, the added value of the present study lies in its capacity to provide a more nuanced view of reality and to paint a vivid portrait of specific real-life experiences. The adoption files as such and the first-hand unmediated documents they contain, give a direct insight into the intimate lives of a generation of people born between 1855 and 1880. Ultimately, they allow us to look at the past through primary sources which echo the lives of “ordinary” people of modest social background for the most part, a population known for the paucity of documents they produced and left behind. Owing to the personal nature of the archive, the article will maintain confidentiality, referring to the petitioners and the people involved in the cases using their first names and only the initial of their family names⁶.

Birth Control and the Working Class in Late Nineteenth Century Britain

In spite of the ongoing taboo which surrounded human reproduction, birth control ideas started to circulate more widely in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century under the influence of authors such as Scottish homoeopathic physician George Drysdale and his infamous, *The Elements of Social Science or, Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* (1855) and of the neo-Malthusians who – unlike Malthus who favoured abstinence – advocated the use of contraception. The turning point is often set in 1877, when social reformers Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh managed to generate massive amounts of publicity by being charged and tried for obscenity and immorality on account of their publishing Dr Charles Knowlton’s *The Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (1832)⁷. A few months after the activists’ trial, the struggle for birth control finally became institutionalised with the creation of the Malthusian League. The scandal and its wide sensational coverage by British newspapers helped to generate a soaring demand for contraception information. Knowlton’s book – which only cost sixpence in the hope that it would also reach the poorer sections of the population – sold 185,000 copies in the three and a half years following the trial (Jütte 121). Besant’s own popular guide book on contraceptive methods entitled *The Law of Population: Its Consequences and Its Bearing Upon Human Conduct and Morals* (1878)

⁶ While a handful of academics interested in studying illegitimacy, marriage, the social condition of servants and unwed mothers have already explored the London Hospital archives, few have so far looked into the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the files were carefully classified by the institution and were not meant to be seen for a period of 110 years after the child’s admission. John Gillis was one of the first academics to explore the London Foundling Hospital archive in 1979. Since then, other academics have followed through such as Bernd Weisbrod (1985), Ana Clark (1987), Ruth McClure (1980), Françoise Barret Ducrocq (1992), Ginger Frost (1995) and more recently Alys Levene (2007), Gillian Pugh (2007), Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen (2012), Samantha Williams (2018), and Virginia L. Grimaldi (2017).

⁷ The medical handbook which advocated reproduction control and detailed contraceptive techniques was banned in the USA, although illegal editions circulated.

became a bestseller and sold 175,000 copies by the time it was withdrawn from circulation in 1891. By 1878, the British birth-rate started to decline with contraception reported to have become “established practice” among the upper and middle classes (Langer 686).

Before artificial methods of contraception started to become more readily available, people mainly resorted to either *coitus interruptus* or abstinence. Other traditional fertility control methods included abortion and infanticide. In his early birth control tract entitled *Moral Physiology: A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (1832), social reformer Robert Dale Owen mentions the withdrawal method first, introducing it as follows:

Among the modes of preventing conception which may have prevailed in various countries, that which has been adopted, and is now practised, by the cultivated classes on the continent of Europe, by the French, the Italians, and I believe, by the Germans and Spaniards, consists of complete withdrawal, on the part of the man, immediately previous to emission. *This is, in all cases, effectual* (Owen 46-47).

The artificial methods of contraception which gradually became available to the general public from the 1860s onwards included the male rubber sheath and the vaginal diaphragm. Sheaths which remained rather expensive were still associated with prostitution and venereal diseases and were mostly used by middle to upper class couples. Other less expensive methods included the sponge, soaked in spermicide, or the vaginal douche, as recommended by Charles Knowlton himself, performed by injecting medicinal liquid or water into the vagina (48). Quinine suppositories were another cheap method. Women could also make their own, using cocoa butter or glycerine (Ross, *Love and Toil* 102). It was not until the 1890s that contraceptive devices such as the sheath or the diaphragm were widely produced and commercialised (McLaren, *Birth Control* 307).

In the working-class, the high prices and the reported high failure rate of such devices if not used properly deterred people from resorting to artificial methods of contraception (Knight 59). The majority also remained overwhelmingly hostile in principle to birth control. It was perceived as immoral and contrary to Christian principles and there was a general suspicion of middle-class attempts at imposing their “moral apparatus” on the working class (Weeks 68-69). Furthermore, contraception continued to be presented as a form of self-help medicine until the early years of the twentieth century as the British medical profession kept its distance and remained preoccupied with aspirations toward moral restraint (Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* 185). As far as early feminist activists were concerned, they remained ambivalent in their attitude towards birth control and expressed a general concern that contraception would further subjugate women and turn them into sexual slaves. Social purity campaigners such as Josephine Butler or Ellice Hopkins were instead insisting on the right for married women to be allowed periods of abstinence that would prevent conception and on the need for husbands to be as pure as their wives. Their approach was inspired by religious beliefs and focused on the idea that conduct, especially male conduct, should be improved (Farmer 142). Certain sections of the working class adhered to the values of social purity and are thought to have increasingly resorted to sexual continence (Walkowitz 85).

In the selected sources, the circumstances surrounding sexual interactions are seldom detailed. The love letters in which male authors refer to sexual intimacy are focused on feelings and rarely give specific information as to the means used by the couples to control their fertility. In the petitioners’ testimonies the focus is rather put on the existence of a formal engagement, on the number of times the intimate relations took place and also on whether or not these relations had been consensual. Some indirect clues regarding the couples’ use of contraception can however be inferred from this series of statements recorded and archived by the London Foundling Hospital. Over the span of the 26 years under study, the secretaries in charge of writing down petitioners’ testimonies used standardised expressions. In the files where the

initials “c.c.” were used as a short version for “criminal conversation” – that is to say, sexual intercourse – reports echo each other: “c.c. was never repeated” (Foundling Hospital, Betsey W., 1884); “c.c. was once repeated” (Foundling Hospital, Kate M.H., 1883); “c.c. was repeated three of four times” (Foundling Hospital, Rose B., 1884). Considering that petitioners rarely reported more than four or five occurrences of sexual relations outside marriage, it can be inferred that the young couples must have indulged in sexual relations with no contraceptive method, especially if they were engaged. This could explain why pregnancy was said to take place so quickly, only after a limited number of sexual interactions. The source of the pregnancy could also be linked to a unique sexual encounter, often described as having occurred against the young woman’s will, as we can see in this excerpt from general servant Rosina E.F.’s testimony:

I was out walking in Upper st Islington in august last when I saw him. he said good evening. I replied. he said can I see you home. I said ‘yes’. he asked me to meet him again which I did on the following Sunday. we went for a walk and I used to meet him every Sunday after that one Sunday night he asked me to have some whiskey which I foolishly took he then took me across Highbury fields where he seduced me in the open. it was never repeated. I did not know that I was in trouble until I saw a Doctor in May (Foundling Hospital, Rosina E.F. 1900).

All in all, an average of less than 10% of the petitioners reported having had sexual relations for an extended period of time, hinting at their possible resort to a form of contraception. In the following excerpt, Ann M. H., a chambermaid in East Dulwich, described her relationship with a footman she was working with as free from all engagement. Here, the petitioner’s detailed description of the circumstances that led to the sexual intimacy reveals a somewhat rebellious attitude adopted by the young couple who drank what was probably their employer’s champagne and had sexual intercourse in their living room while the family was away. The very vague expression “from time to time” might indicate that sexual relations occurred on a regular basis:

When first acquainted with the F I was living with Mrs P of 15, Pembridge Place Notting Hill as lady’s maid : I went there in the summer of 1875 and the F came there as footman 2 months after and he took notice of me soon : one evening when the family were out he gave some champagne in the dining room and c.c. took place there and was repeated from time to time : one day at Brighton when we were staying there I was seen coming from his room and was discharged (Foundling Hospital, Ann M.H., 1878).

Other typical examples of prolonged sexual relations include the case of Cierly C.H., a nineteen-year-old general servant who reported that she had a sexual affair with her fiancé for almost a year, from January 1895 to November 1895, well after she discovered her pregnancy in August (Foundling Hospital, Cierly C.H., 1896). In the case of general servant Lina E., the intimate relations were said to have been repeated for almost three months: “Easter Monday I had a holiday for the day. I went to the F.’s house, he had c.c. with me. His parents were out. This was continued for about 3 months – sometimes at his house and sometimes at his sister’s” (Foundling Hospital, Lina E., 1892). For Margareth E. who worked in sales, sexual intimacy occurred over a six-month period: “Spring of 1889 he had c.c. with me at home. This continued until Winter when I told him my condition. From that time he kept away” (Foundling Hospital, Margareth E., 1890.). Catherine W., a general servant, experienced a similar situation:

I first became acquainted with him at a ball [...] on 12 March 1877. We afterwards met again and frequently walked out together, and about six months after he visited

me and seduced me under a promise of marriage. We were engaged 8 months c.c. was frequently repeated at the same place (Foundling Hospital, Catherine W., 1879).

It is difficult to gauge to what extent these isolated examples testify to exceptions to the rule or, on the contrary, suggest widespread, unacknowledged practices. However, cases of long-term sexual intimacy where pregnancy is delayed point to the possible use of some means of fertility control by these young couples, most probably withdrawal.

The Question of Sexual Ignorance

In the last decades of the nineteenth century sexuality still remained largely a taboo topic in the private sphere⁸. In working-class families, the traditional attitude was to avoid talking about sex and to make sure that the sexual knowledge of young people remained limited. Sexual life was often shrouded in mystery. It was sung about in public houses and in music halls, but never discussed at home. When working-class mothers gave birth, the children were sent outside or to neighbours' houses. For the sake of respectability, and above all out of embarrassment, working-class women were known to refuse to give their daughters a sex education. Historian Ellen Ross argues that: "by the later decades of the nineteenth century, sex was a mysterious and forbidden arena for working class girls in London whose mothers were struggling to keep them sexually ignorant and thus 'respectable'" (*Love and Toil* 99). Female ignorance in matters of sexuality was considered as being closely connected to their social status and respectability (Jones 5). It was believed that a young woman who knew nothing about sex would be less likely to have sexual experiences before marriage, and that fear and ignorance were highly effective in combating sexual temptations. Amongst the middle class, ignorance was also seen by parents as a far more effective brake than the confidence that could be generated by information campaigns (Bourke 32; Arnot 7). It appears that young people did not often challenge sexual mystery, nor did they seek to gain sexual knowledge and as historian Kate Fisher points out, "ignorance was as much a state of mind as a quantifiable level of understanding" (26).

During her 1877 trial, Besant had put forward the need for a healthy society to speak openly about sexuality, and also the need for mothers to inform their daughters about the realities of life. Referring to her daughter, she commented:

I say deliberately to you, as mother of a daughter whom I love, that I believe it will tend to her happiness in her future, as well as to her health, that she shall not have made to her that kind of mystery about sexual functions that every man and woman must know sooner or later; that I feel, with Dr Acton, that it is better to give instruction honestly, decently, and carefully, than to allow it to be thrown into children by their experience of the world (possibly in a bad and evil way) (Bradlaugh and Besant 128).

Yet, the harmful effects of sexual ignorance and misinformation which could be remedied through sexual education would not start being addressed by influential writers until the very end of the century, with authors like Dr. Henry Havelock Ellis, but also Grant Allen, George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells (McLaren, *Birth Control* 364). In the early twentieth century, the Women's Cooperative Guild led a remarkable campaign to improve the living conditions of working-class mothers with sex education as one of the central focal points. Their publication in 1915 of *Maternity*, a collection of testimonies from women reporting their experience as mothers in the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s allowed, among other things, to denounce the extent of

⁸ Matters linked to sexuality were however beginning to make news headlines – as was the case with the 1885 Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon, a series of articles unveiling the horrendous inner workings of child prostitution in London, written by journalist William T. Stead and published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

young working-class women's sexual ignorance. If women often learnt nothing from their mothers, some of them even claimed to have no knowledge of how children were born. Here is an excerpt from the testimony of a woman who recalls her youth in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, attesting to the general excess of modesty towards the "things of life" and the dangers that ensued:

When I was married, I had to leave my own town to go out into the world, as it were, and when I had to have my first baby, I knew absolutely nothing, not even how they were born. I had many a time thought how cruel [...] my mother was not to tell me all about the subject when I left home. Although I was twenty-five years of age when married, I had never been where a baby was born. When my baby was born I had been in my labour for thirty-six hours, and did not know what was the matter with me, and when it was born it was as black as a coal and took the doctor a long while to get life into it. It was only a seven-month baby, and I feel quite sure if I had been told anything about pregnancy it would not have happened. I carried a heavy piece of oilcloth, which brought on my labour (Llewelyn 50).

In the sources at hand, the same state of complete ignorance is reported by some of the youngest petitioners who claimed they knew nothing about reproduction and did not understand what was happening to them when sexual intimacy took place. In 1891, 15-year-old Helena M. S. reported for instance that: "When F acted as he did, I did not know what it was or the consequences" (Foundling Hospital, Helena M. S., 1891). A similar lack of education is expressed by Elizabeth H. B. who stated she was raped by a clergyman when she was barely fifteen:

One Monday in July 1877 he came in when I happened to be alone in the House and in a parlour at the back of the shop, he began to kiss me and pull me about and locked the door and effected his purpose against my consent. I had no idea what he was going to do, he stayed there an hour and c.c. took place twice then: I told him to leave off but he said I was not to say anything to my mother and I should be all right (Foundling Hospital, Elizabeth H.B. 1878).

At times, the trust women placed in their sexual partner and the solemn promises of these latter as to the consequences of sexual intimacy can be unsettling. Eleanor F., a nineteen-year-old general servant reported that, on three separate occasions, she had had sexual relations with a young man who stated he was studying to become an architect⁹. She admitted to the investigators that the young man's promises convinced her to consent to the deed: "He said no harm would come of it and he would marry me in March 1894" (Foundling Hospital, Eleanor F., 1894). The same type of promise could also be expressed in writing, as was the case with a letter general servant Bessie H – who we mentioned earlier – received from the man she had been seeing for a few months: "My own little pet, you love and trust me just the same don't you, and you will have no fear of consequences in being with me again. Dearest I solemnly promise that no harm whatever will come of it, and see no reason why we should wish to give each other up" (Foundling Hospital, Bessie H., 1896, letter undated). Perhaps these women were truly ignorant of the consequences of intimacy, or romantically naive. However, in these two cases, the intimate relations were reported to have been repeated several times implying that these young men's promises might have relied on the use of some form of contraception. The discovery of a pregnancy outside the bonds of marriage was received as tragic news. For a man, it meant having to face up to his responsibility and marry the young woman in question. If not, escape was still an alternative which many young men from the selected sample chose (either to a distant colony, or a distant region of the country itself). For women, it amounted to

⁹ Although the enquiry led by the Foundling Hospital investigator revealed that he never registered as a student.

social ostracism and utter loss of “character”¹⁰. Families were also impacted, with mothers and sisters suffering from the “disgrace” brought about by the birth of an illegitimate child. In the face of such harsh consequences, cases of pregnancy denial were quite frequent. As a matter of fact, the sources contain cases in which petitioners claimed they were not aware of their condition until the day they gave birth. These cases are rare, and involve very young girls like Annette A., who was only fourteen when she gave birth: “I came to England with my mother on the ‘Pembroke Castle’ 3rd Class. On this ship my child was born August 17th 1894. This was the first I knew about it”. Her mother confirmed their surprise: “I know nothing about the boy Carl E., and knew nothing about my girl’s condition until her child was born” (Foundling Hospital, Annette A., 1894). Other cases of possible pregnancy denials involve petitioners who reported they did not know they were pregnant until they could feel the child moving in their womb. Actually, this stage – which was described as “quickening” – was considered as the only irrevocable proof of pregnancy at the time. Doctors themselves could have difficulty diagnosing pregnancy. In 1899, Florence E.B. reported her pregnancy was only officially confirmed by a doctor one month before her baby was born:

I did not know the condition I was in. I went to Dr A. [...] that gentleman examined me, and thought at first I was with child. Afterwards said he did not think so. He gave me some medicine but I did not take it. In January 1899 my father sent for Dr Baines [...] who examined me. He then told me of my condition. I was confined on the 27th Feb 1899 under the name of Ethel Carlton [...]. Dr Rainsford living close by attended me (Foundling Hospital, Florence Ethel B., 1899).

In Alice F.’s detailed account of her story which she sent in a separate letter to the London Foundling Hospital’s governors, the pregnancy was also confirmed by a doctor at quite an advanced stage, early in April 1901, less than three months before her baby girl was born on the 26th of June. The 20-year-old woman who was working as a teacher in a girls’ school, also stated she didn’t know what the consequences of sexual intimacy were: “It was at that time that he seduced me. Having had no connection with any-one before I had no idea of the trouble that might follow & so took no notice of it, I did not know that I was pregnant until about 3 months ago when I saw a doctor” (Foundling Hospital, Alice F., 1901). Here such a statement coming from a young educated woman working as a teacher illustrates the extent to which sexual prudery and ignorance remained widespread among young women.

Abortifacient Drugs and Fertility Control

Historian Angus McLaren stresses the importance of abortion and abstinence as two traditional methods of fertility control which are often overlooked by historians focusing on contraception (*Birth Control* 322). With the 1803 Ellenborough Act, abortions performed after quickening became a capital offense punishable by death. The penalty was changed to life imprisonment with the adoption of the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, and late Victorian legislation remained strictly intolerant of women performing abortions for other women or trying to self-abort. On the whole and despite such a harsh stance, resorting to abortion was widespread in all social circles. In poor working-class neighbourhoods, people were reported to consider abortion as a necessary evil which helped save marriages, protect families and secure the employability of young women (Thompson F.M.L. 308). Abortions which were induced using instruments remained extremely dangerous. Although techniques were becoming safer with the arrival of

¹⁰ The use of the term “character” is prevalent in the London Foundling Hospital archives here selected. Just like the term “reputation”, it was an ambiguous term, being mostly used at the time to point to an individual’s moral integrity and uprightness (Collini 32-33).

anaesthetics and antiseptics towards the end of the century, thousands of women were known to have damaged their health or died from the consequences of these illegal back-street abortions (Sauer 88).

Women who wanted to end their pregnancy could alternatively resort to abortifacient drugs. They were often purchased through advertisements in the Sunday and local evening press. A series of articles entitled “Quacks and abortion” published in 1898 in the *Lancet* denounced these illegal advertisements and the evasive language used to avoid any problems with the law. They were published alongside other adverts for “female medicines” used for problems linked to menstruation, or amongst those for soap or perfume or treatments for asthma and chronic bronchitis. Historian P.S. Brown cites the example of an advert for Mr. P. Blanchard’s medicine and its clever wording meant to attract women looking for abortive pills, warning potential buyers that the medicine “should not be taken by those expecting to become Mothers, as it is sure to produce miscarriage” (300). Street doctors would also sell these remedies for effective abortions along with other concoctions meant for venereal diseases. In working-class neighbourhoods, abortifacient drugs could be obtained from women who acted as unsanctioned abortionists. Recourse to such supposed “miracle cures” appears to have been popular in the late nineteenth century at all levels of society although the prices of the abortifacients sold through newspaper adverts were often high and too expensive for working-class people (Knight 62).

Late Victorians often confused abortion with contraception. At the chemist’s, contraception devices were sold alongside drugs and plants which could be used as abortifacients, such as quinine or lead pills (Knight 58). The abortifacient drugs which were sold through advertisements were composed of plants and could contain pennyroyal, rye, henbane, scilla, castor oil and elm. Lead derivatives or gunpowder could also be on the list of ingredients, as well as turpentine, iron, gin or quinine (Weeks 71; Bland, *Banishing the Beast* 190). These remedies were often ineffective. They could also be poisonous and harmful to the mother, and result in malformations in children. In *Maternity* (1915), there are references to pills that mothers had been taking and to the highly dangerous effects these drugs had on them:

The mother wonders what she has to live for ; if there is another baby coming she hopes it will be dead when it is born. The result is she begins to take drugs. I need hardly tell you the pain and suffering she goes through if the baby survives, or the shock it is to the mother when she is told there is something wrong with the baby (Llewelyn 42).

In the same compilation of testimonies, another woman reported losing three friends who took some sort of drug in the hope of not having to go through another pregnancy:

I know personally of many mothers who have had very dreadful times of sickness all through the time, and others who have not been able to have the necessary food to strengthen them some through having bad or careless husbands, others through shortness of work ; and, I am sorry to say, those who have felt they would not carry children, some because of bad husbands, others because they felt they could not properly feed and clothe those they had. There are three who lost their lives [...]. These all took some kind of drug, and of course did the work they wanted it to do (Llewelyn 168-9).

Although the files at hand contain no direct reference to contraceptive methods, references to abortifacient drugs emerge from petitioners’ testimonies and from letters sent by the men they were seeing. Such medicine, which came either in the form of pills or by the bottle, could be recommended by young men in the event of an unwanted pregnancy. Here, male involvement in matters of birth control is made obvious by the sources. When barmaid Lizzie A.B.

announced her pregnancy to the man she was seeing, she reported she was offered some medicine: “I told him my condition he gave me drugs but I would not take them and he repeated his promise and talked of going to Africa, mining” (Foundling Hospital, Lizzie A.B., 1894). Annie R. who was a general servant engaged to a clerk in telegraphy stated she was also given abortifacient drugs by her fiancé: “he sent me some pills some of which I have now” (Foundling Hospital, Annie R., 1901). These remedies might have already had quite a bad reputation as, in both cases, the women refused the men’s proposal and went through with their pregnancy. Evidence seems to point to the fact that married women with children, in difficult circumstances, were resorting to abortion more frequently than young unmarried women (Knight 62).

Sometimes, the medicine could prove ineffective, as was the case with Ellen P., the daughter of a blacksmith, who reported falling ill after taking the remedy offered by her fiancé. Here is what the young man, who was supposedly a man of means, wrote her when he learnt she had been sick: “Let me know what has made you ill and how your aunt found it out tell me everything and if you get any larger I don’t understand why that medicine had not done you any good as it has never known to fail” (Foundling Hospital, Ellen P., 1890, letter undated), a comment demonstrating the belief some people had in the efficacy and reliability of these abortion remedies. In her testimony in 1901, Maria W., who worked as a draper’s assistant also reported taking some drugs her French fiancé might have given her, however without giving any information as to the possible effects the drugs had on her: “I spoke to him, he said I will get you some medicine which I took and he said he would marry me I have never seen him since July” (Foundling Hospital, Maria W., 1901). He was working as a waiter and soon disappeared, probably having gone back to France.

In a correspondence excerpt from 1899, Agnes L.’s fiancé clearly expresses extreme concern, but also tenderness and complicity. The young man refers to a bottle of abortive medicine and to a book, probably on how to induce abortion. “I am very sorry to hear the news of this morning I do hope by the time you get this you will see a difference or at least by Sunday but I think it is all in vain at any rate. I have sent for a bottle of that stuff I wrote for it at breakfast time but I could not get a postal order till dinner time” (Foundling Hospital, Agnes L. 1900, letter undated). The “stuff” referred to in this excerpt is without doubt an abortifacient drug. Here the attitude of the young man is somewhat pessimistic (“I think it is all in vain at any rate”). The pregnancy is only suspected but he’s convinced it will shortly be confirmed. What is intriguing with this letter is that the young man who worked as a domestic servant, refers to a book he is using as a source of information regarding contraceptive and/or abortive remedies:

I have lent that book of mine out I have a lot more faith in that book than I have in that other stuff one of our chaps have got one. I tried to see him when we knocked off tonight but he was gone I will borrow it off him for an hour tomorrow afternoon and if it mentions anything that I can get from the chemists for you by Sunday I will do so Dear but my Love you must not fret yourself about over it that is only making it worse for you, you must cheer yourself up and not get down-hearted that’s a good girl if we are having a bit of bad luck we must get out of it (Foundling Hospital, Agnes L. 1900, letter undated).

One can contend that the man was referring to documentation on birth-control methods which, by the end of the century, was becoming more readily available. The letter testifies to the fact that young men could exchange this kind of medical literature, lending books to each other in order to try and remedy their ignorance. In this excerpt, the anxiety felt by the young man is evident and seems to suggest that abortion was not solely the decision of the woman, nor of her

close circle of female friends and relatives and that young men could play an active role in finding ways to terminate the pregnancy.

Conclusion

Late nineteenth century British society was affected by ongoing taboos regarding private and also public discussion on the topic of sexuality and birth control. As Ronald Hyam explains, commenting on the resounding impact of the social purity campaigns: “The worst result of the late-Victorian campaign was the silence which descended over all aspects of sex, producing the most appalling ignorance” (qtd. in Szreter 416). The documents at hand help break some of the silence surrounding premarital sexual relationships in late Victorian Britain. The direct references to the use of drugs meant to produce abortion in the files reveal that for young unwed couples, the so-called “miracle remedies” were readily available, maybe more so than artificial methods of contraception – a disturbing offshoot of the overwhelming sexual ignorance and misinformation in late Victorian society. On the whole, sustained lack of sex education as reported by some petitioners played a decisive role in keeping the use of artificial contraceptives relatively low among the working class up until the middle of the twentieth century.

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