

Strange days

Alison McCulloch's single-minded survey of her half of the abortion debate misses the colourful chaos of the 1970s.

by ROSEMARY McLEOD

A shrill note of feminist anger will forever accompany the abortion debate, but back in the 1970s all-round hysteria over the issue was something else. Think pink plastic fetuses, mass marches, arson of abortion facilities, police raids, thumping recorded fetal heartbeats and Norm Kirk (and, more predictably, Rob Muldoon) coming out on the wrong side.

I helped a friend find Australian contacts; I hissed from the public gallery during parliamentary debate. Abortion was pretty much banned – as it was in my mother's time, when an illegal abortion nearly killed her.

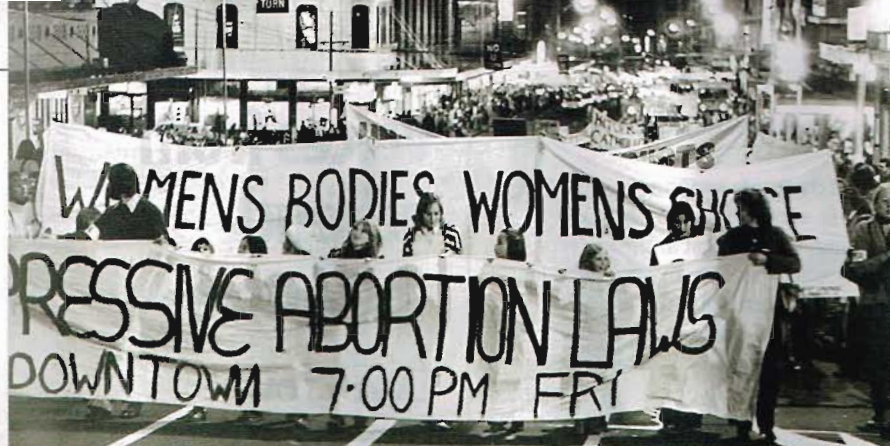
If the past is another country, this was a strange place. How to explain to people who never knew it the power of the smug male-dominated everything, when doctors could refuse the pill to unmarried women and fashion echoed the confusion by coming up with maxi-length skirts worn unbuttoned over hot pants?

Feminists were "wimmin's libbers". Roger Hall's play *Middle-Age Spread* depicted a traditional wife with a sneer. I wrote a sitcom giving female characters gag lines, against prevailing formula. Of course I was mad.

Germaine Greer told us she wore no knickers; we lapped up Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*. Menstrual extractors were briefly in vogue. It was a time of *Broadsheet* magazine.

Somehow all that colourful chaos doesn't make it into Alison McCulloch's single-mindedly detailed survey of one half of the abortion debate as it was then – and, we're told, still is today.

"New Zealand women still endure a powerful cultural taboo against abortion that is codified in a set of punitive laws passed by a conservative and overwhelmingly male Parliament," she writes. And yet we have something like 15,000 legal



abortions performed each year and I've yet to hear of an abortion being denied.

I'm on McCulloch's side in all this, and some of the history she records is fascinating. Who remembers that crusading journalist Pat Booth, who fought to have Arthur Allan Thomas pardoned, was the editor of a Catholic newspaper who pursued a charge of indecency against the stage show *Hair* and testified that it offended him personally? But what relevance does that have to the abortion debate?

Seeking to expose hypocrisy among conservative opponents, McCulloch revisits the awful Colin Moyle affair, in which nobody looked good, and suggests Muldoon slept around. Proving someone is a hypocrite – the idea being these people trumpeted family values – doesn't automatically make their attitude to abortion invalid. It does, however, illustrate how potent an issue this remains for the author and fellow lobbyists

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Mass marches were part of the all-round hysteria that prevailed in the 1970s.

who distrust the gains women have made. They want abortion on demand and I guess there will be conflict around that, for the time being anyway.

I've escorted a woman to an abortion clinic and been harassed by the anti-abortion lobby, so I'm one of the many who deplore that level of intrusion and aggression. Having nearly lost a mother to the past regime, I see no merit in it. Yet I'd still rather both sides of the debate were heard on important issues like this, which may be where McCulloch and I part company. ■

FIGHTING TO CHOOSE: THE ABORTION RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN NEW ZEALAND,
by Alison McCulloch (VUP, \$50).

