

Book review

FIGHTING TO CHOOSE: THE ABORTION RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN NEW ZEALAND

Alison McCulloch

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‘Abortion is not just about abortion’, Alison McCulloch argues in her history of the struggle for women’s right to abortion in New Zealand (p. 278). Like the 1970s feminists, for McCulloch the personal is political; the right to abortion is symbolic of women’s autonomy. In her acknowledgements she writes that when she became pregnant in her 20s and sought an abortion she was enraged that under New Zealand law she had to show she was mentally unstable in order to get an abortion, and further enraged at having anti-abortionists approach her on her way to the clinic with their signs and comments about killing babies. Her starting point is that abortion should be freely available to all women at all stages of their pregnancy and that it should be their right to choose. She wrote this book with a view to advancing that cause and persuading others to join her, asking ‘what can the events of the past tell us about where the struggle might go from here?’ (p. 10)

The abortion wars in New Zealand began following the liberalisation of abortion laws in other countries, including Britain, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Three significant lobby groups form the basis of her study: the anti-abortion group the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (Spuc) formed in 1970, and two pro-choice groups, the Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand (Alranz) formed in 1971 and Women’s National Abortion Action Campaign (Wonaac) in 1973. Central to the abortion story in New Zealand were the 1975-77 Commission of Inquiry into Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion, which she analyses in detail; the 1977 Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act; and the 1977 and 1978 Crimes Amendment Acts. Her book traverses the period before and after the passing of these acts. The situation before 1977 was that abortion in New Zealand was illegal unless the life of the mother was at risk. However, the 1938 test case in Britain brought to law by gynaecologist Aleck Bourne, which established mental health as grounds for abortion, also applied to New Zealand. From 1978, abortion was permitted in New Zealand up to twenty weeks following conception to preserve the physical and/or mental health of the woman, and in cases of rape or incest, or if there was a substantial risk that the child, if born, would be seriously handicapped. The woman had to have the approval of two certifying consultants, one of whom had to be a practising obstetrician or gynaecologist, appointed by a central Abortion Supervisory Committee and overseen by Parliament. By 2012, 98 per cent of abortions appeared under so-called mental health grounds (p. 12).

It could be argued that abortions are now fairly accessible in New Zealand, but McCulloch warns women to remain vigilant in the face of a strong anti-abortion lobby. Does the pro-life

movement in New Zealand really have ‘tens of thousands of members’, as McCulloch reports? (p. 264). She certainly considers it a very real threat, and ponders what kind of world would result from a ‘pro-life’ victory in the abortion wars, asking: ‘Consider the implications if fertilised eggs were given legal and cultural “personhood”, if most forms of contraception were banned, if sex education were further curtailed, if gay sex were again outlawed? Is this what an anti-abortion victory looks like?’ (p. 276). In her view, it is. She cites a study in the USA that found opposition to abortion linked to “‘a conservative approach to matters of traditional morality,” that is *disapproval* [her emphasis] of pre-marital sex, birth control for teenagers, sex education and divorce’, adding that ‘A similar divide could be found in New Zealand’ (p. 205). Thus she presents the threat as undermining modern society as we know it, which is possibly overstating the case.

I learnt a lot from her history, nevertheless. She is correct in pointing out that this important social issue of modern times has been the subject of little academic research, and she has consulted widely to produce this history and has plenty of quotations revealing sexist and social conformist views in New Zealand’s past as she negotiates her way through government inquiries relating to sexual issues, in 1937, 1946, 1954, and finally 1975-77. I came away with a much clearer understanding of the differences between Wonaac and Alranz. She describes Alranz as taking a ‘reformist, humanitarian’ and ‘health and safety’ stance, in contrast to Wonaac’s feminist principles. She sees the moderate stance of Alranz as largely responsible for undermining the goal of free access to abortion. She also analyses the pro-choice movement’s problems, with the ‘constant birth-death cycle of the forming and dismantling of coalitions, and attempts at co-operation among small groups’ (p. 176). This was reflected in the wider second-wave feminist movement, and she describes its splintering in the late 1970s (you will read how this was encapsulated in the ‘infamous Black Olive Affair at Piha’). She provides a lively account of the activities of Wonaac in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to the double-standards of certain political leaders. She explains that, ‘Within Wonaac itself, the debate over whether men should be involved in the group, which had erupted at its inception in 1973, flared up at fairly regular intervals but never proved fatal’ (p. 177). However, intriguingly she does not tell us the outcome of this particular debate. She laments that Labour governments, which should be on their side, constantly betrayed the cause (yet with their trade union roots, this was perhaps not so unexpected).

McCulloch provides much detailed information and analysis of the 1977 Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion. However, I was disappointed when she quoted a Dr Tony Johnston saying that, if the report was submitted as a graduate essay, he would return it to its author unmarked as it was so poorly constructed (p. 150). This is a serious indictment and I wanted to know what subject Johnston lectured in, assuming he was a university lecturer. She does not say.

I was not totally persuaded by her portrayal of the anti-abortion sector. She explains how the latter has been underpinned by established religion and in particular the Roman Catholic Church. When the Auckland University’s anti-abortion group, Prolife Auckland, described itself in 2012 as ‘an affiliated club for students who embrace a *secular* pro-life philosophy’ (her emphasis), she saw this as a ruse, disguising the fact that it was among those groups backed by a ‘powerful, well-funded institution that is organised religion’ (p. 270). Earlier in the book, she affirmed that ‘the activist anti-abortion movement is essentially a religious one’ (p. 57). Intriguingly she sees a strong Catholic influence on New Zealand society, quoting the husband of an Alranz executive member who told feminist Sandra Coney in 1976 that ‘Catholics are over-represented in authority positions; doctors, lawyers, politicians, PSA, trade unions and the Labour Party at executive level’ (p. 58). That may be true, but it would be useful to have

a more authoritative source on this important statement for her argument. She writes that Sir William Liley, co-founder of Spuc, was a Methodist; while this is true, according to his biographer, 'Although [Liley was] brought up in a Methodist/Anglican tradition, he held no specific religious beliefs': ('Obituary: Sir Albert William Liley', <http://www.rsnz.org/directory/year-books/ybook97/obitLiley.html>). In the same paragraph where she discusses the Roman Catholic Church (p.125) she also refers to Liley's wife, Margaret Liley, who was not, to my knowledge, a Catholic. Were there possibly factors other than religion driving at least some members of Spuc? I was interested to learn that the '[Marilyn] Pryor papers show not only the stresses and strains at the very heart of Spuc, but that these problems had begun much earlier than previously known' (pp. 72-3). She does not, however, go on to explain the sources or nature of these stresses. More analysis of Spuc would have been useful.

The book is filled with colour, life and indignation. There is much to be entertained by and to rue. It will be essential reading for anyone interested in the abortion wars in New Zealand, but readers also need to keep in mind that it was written, unashamedly, by a protagonist. She tells us that Wonaac currently has only six members, which does make one wonder if the personal is no longer political. Modern society's interpretation of the abortion laws have become liberalised to the extent that it has become difficult, in her words, 'to woman the barricades' (p. 275). Yet she passionately believes that pro-choice advocates cannot afford to lapse into quiescence; she is on a campaign trail.

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