***Risking Their Lives. New Zealand Abortion Stories 1900 – 1939* by Margaret Sparrow. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2017. 383 pp. NZ price: $40. ISBN 9781776561636.**

*Risking Their Lives* is the third book by Margaret Sparrow on the history of abortion in Aotearoa New Zealand. Focusing on the period 1900 to 1939, this publication fills in the gap created by her first two books which covered the periods 1940 to 1980 and the nineteenth century respectively. Sparrow is a retired doctor and former president of the Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand (ALRANZ) and one of the strengths of this work is the explanation of medical terms used in the primary sources. Her main sources are newspaper articles and coroners reports and so her focus is on cases where abortions resulted in death or serious illness, rather than on cases where women had a more positive experience of obtaining an abortion. While I agree with Sparrow that access to abortions performed by qualified doctors is a far superior situation to that which existed prior to the latter part of the twentieth century, historians such as Barbara Baird in Australia have challenged the view that abortions performed by doctors are always better than those performed outside medical institutions and it would have been interesting had Sparrow addressed and engaged with this view, even if to refute it.

The book is structured thematically, with chapters covering the McMillan Report, medical matters, contraception, the law and then different groups who performed abortions, including self-abortions. Detailed examples, often a re-writing of entire newspaper articles, are given but there is little sense if there was any change in the forty-year period under consideration. While the examples are interesting, perhaps if there had been fewer examples and more analysis, readers might get a better sense of changes during this period and the author’s arguments would be more clear. The second chapter of the book deals with the McMillan Report which was published in 1936 after a commission of inquiry was established to investigate the high number of deaths from abortions in New Zealand. Given that this occurred near the end of the period under examination, the chapter would have been better positioned later in the book which would have allowed for the reader to reflect on the mismatch between the lived experiences of many women seeking abortions and the views of the committee.

At times the detail provided seems excessive and somewhat off topic. For example, chapter three begins with a number of short biographies of doctors who were involved in the development of the medical understanding of sepsis – what is covered in three pages could be reduced to a paragraph. Likewise, in the fourth chapter on contraception the author provides detailed biographies of Marie Stopes, Margaret Sanger and Ettie Rout. While certainly all these women are relevant to the topic at hand, it would have been better to limit the discussion to how Stopes’ and Sanger’s work influenced discussions on abortion and contraception in New Zealand (obviously Rout’s life history is more relevant to the topic as she was a New Zealander, but this still could have been shortened). It was also rather odd that all three women were referred to by their first names in this chapter, but the men who were discussed were referred to by their surnames. Again, in the final chapter Doris Gordon is referred to by her first name (p.345).

In the final chapter Sparrow reflects on the differences between the period under examination and today for women, men, medical professionals, the legal profession and politicians. Her assertion that adultery and desertion were the most common grounds for divorce (p.344) is incorrect. By 1939 there were more petitions for divorce on the ground of separation of three years or more than on the grounds of adultery and desertion combined. This also challenges her view that apportioning blame and punishing wrongdoers were the underlying principles of the divorce laws. As this book was published in 2017, Sparrow did not have the opportunity to include the Law Commission report on alternative approaches to the abortion law published in 2018 and the subsequent legislation which was introduced in August 2019 which, if passed, will remove abortion from the Crimes Act. The final sentence of the book where Sparrow outlines her wish for something to be developed that women can take in the privacy of their own homes whenever they wish not to be pregnant, is rather confusing, as it sounds as though she is describing the emergency contraceptive pill (morning-after pill).

This book will be of interest to those looking for a well-referenced introduction to the history of abortion in New Zealand and as it is structured around numerous examples it will be accessible to those without historical training, as well as historians. For those wanting additional analysis of this period, a further reading list is provided.

**HAYLEY BROWN**

**London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine**