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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'The Birth of the Pill,' Jonathan Eig

How a Jewish biologist, an MIT-educated heiress and a Catholic doctor triggered the revolution.

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By **HENRY ALLEN**

Oct. 10, 2014 5:01 p.m. ET

In 1960, when the birth-control pill was approved by the Food and Drug Administration, we discovered that a big portion of womanhood was happy to give up or reschedule the sacred fons-et-origo motherhood so celebrated by poets, artists and priests—mostly men—for thousands of years.

“All these years I’ve stayed at home while you had all your fun,” Loretta Lynn sang. “And every year that’s gone by another baby’s come / There’s gonna be some changes made right here on Nursery Hill / You’ve set this chicken your last time ’cause now I’ve got the pill.”

In the spirit of Loretta Lynn, Margaret Sanger, the mother of birth control in America, had written in 1919 of the burden of bearing child after child. “It is her love life that dies first in the fear of undesired

THE BIRTH OF THE PILL

By Jonathan Eig

Norton, 388 pages, \$27.95

pregnancy. It is her opportunity for self expression that perishes first.”

Then, 41 years later, one little pill, taken daily for most of each month, let women seize from men their share of power over childbearing. It changed love, sex, courtship, marriage, education, self-expression, gender politics and the labor force.

By the late 1960s, a fierce, new breed of young woman was celebrated, “booted, pantsuited, birth-controlled and pleasure-goaled,” as Gail Sheehy wrote in a piece about New York’s Maxwell’s Plum, the mother church of singles bars. They were the shock troops of what was called “the sexual revolution.”

Like all revolutions, this one would devour its children, as an epidemic of venereal diseases ensued, including ones many of us had never heard of before—herpes, chlamydia, genital warts. The revolution also produced the Jacobin grimness of activists who brought politics into the bedroom, as in the feminist journal *Off Our Backs*. There was no going back to the *ancien régime*. A cult of youth worship and elitist alarm about overpopulation made parenthood unfashionable and, with the pill, unnecessary.

The pill, like other empowering things—a Princeton sticker on a car window or a .44 magnum Smith & Wesson—had a certain glamour to it. “She’s on the pill,” girls would say admiringly of their roommates back when Vassar girls envied the empowerment of Melina Mercouri playing the hooker in “Never on Sunday.” Even before the pill, the acquisition of a diaphragm had the status of a *louche* rite of passage as described in Philip Roth’s “Goodbye, Columbus” and Mary McCarthy’s “The Group.”

In the early '70s, when both the pill and abortion had become available, I told a trend-savvy colleague that my wife and I were going to have a baby. "Why?" he asked, with lifted eyebrows and lowered eyelids. (In another 10 years, as it happened, he would express astonishment at the joy he found in the birth of his first child, asking, in effect, "Why didn't anyone tell me?")

With pregnancy no longer a risk, the goal of sex became pleasures from coziness to ecstasy. Orgasm for women would be known as the Big O. Cosmopolitan magazine became a guide to attaining it, with cover lines such as "Have You Tried the New Butterfly Position?" (Warning: Do not attempt this without a chiropractor on call.)

"The pill decoupled sex and marriage," journalist Margaret Wenthe has written, "and it also decoupled marriage and procreation. The purpose of marriage was mutual satisfaction, not children. And once that happened, gay marriage probably became inevitable."

Now, Jonathan Eig brings us "The Birth of the Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution." They are: Margaret Sanger, Gregory Pincus, Katharine McCormick and John Rock.

All have been the subject of earlier books. Sanger has her place in history, with her lifelong fight for women's rights, but why aren't any of the others household names? Scientific and technological world changers are often heroes—Galileo, Newton, Edison, Henry Ford or Jonas Salk. But not the scientists and financial backers of the pill. Is it because the fighting over the pill has never been resolved? The most recent skirmishes have involved who should be required to pay for it under Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act. Does something about birth control disquiet even those of us who support it?

We talk about the Salk vaccine against polio, but nobody talks about the Pincus pill against conception. Despite the outrage, hearings and media alarms he prompted for decades with his intense maverick personality and the near-impeccable success of his hormonal research, Gregory Pincus is just another Internet entry. He failed to

get tenure from Harvard, and the press compared him to Frankenstein.

Katharine McCormick, who would inherit much of the McCormick reaper fortune, earned a degree in biology from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1904. Soon, she was using her wealth to fund Sanger's campaigns for women's suffrage and birth control and, later, Pincus's birth control pill. Despite her activism and upper-class status, she is forgotten too.

The fourth crusader was John Rock, a Catholic doctor whose research into fertility led him to means of forestalling it. He took on the Vatican over its ban of the pill. The theological niceties of his argument are worthy of the scholastics, and many Catholic women followed his lead, but he has faded from cultural memory.

In a calm, grind-no-axes style, Mr. Eig reveals a messy history even more forgotten than those who made it. If today's gotcha journalists had been around in the 1950s to probe pill research, there would have been no pill. They would have exposed the conflicts of interest, the bullying of test subjects, along with Sanger's eugenics campaign to sterilize people labeled as genetically unfit.

Reciting this history, Mr. Eig is well aware of the importance and sensitivities of his subject, and he plays down the wit he has displayed in other work. (He is the author of books about Lou Gehrig, Jackie Robinson and Al Capone and a former reporter at this paper.)

He begins with Sanger. Early in the 20th century she "popularized the term 'birth control' and almost single-handedly launched the movement for contraceptive rights in the United States. Women would never gain equality, she had argued, until they were freed from sexual servitude," which included endless and exhausting childbearing.

Sanger had opened the nation's first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn in 1916. She wanted to "reduce population size, restrict reproduction among unfit parents, and make sex more fun, and she had come to

believe that only a truly scientific contraceptive would do.” She worked with women in the slums of New York and wrote of this suffering class of women: “It is she who must watch beside the beds of pain where lie babies who suffer because they have come into overcrowded homes.”

Mr. Eig, at ease with the heady correlations of cultural analysis, concludes: “Neither she nor anyone else could have imagined how birth control would also contribute to the spread of divorce, infidelity, single parenthood, abortion, and pornography. Like any revolutionary, she was willing to tolerate a certain degree of chaos.”

Gregory Pincus attained his own notoriety early. Born in 1903 and raised in a Jewish farming colony in New Jersey, with powerful good looks and an alarmingly intense presence, Pincus described himself at the age of 20 as a “sexologist,” although unlike Sanger he made reproduction, not sex, the center of his universe.

As a biology professor at Harvard he studied in vitro fertilization in rabbits and applied for a grant to study applying the process to humans. Soon the New York Times would report that he was trying to create test-tube babies. “Love will simply be divorced from parenthood if the biologists are right.” Collier’s magazine warned that “the mythical land of the Amazons would then come to life. A world where women could be self-sufficient; a man’s value precisely zero.”

For whatever reason, Harvard ousted him.

In 1944 he and a partner created the Worcester (Mass.) Foundation for Experimental Biology, a ramshackle operation where Pincus did his hormone research in a converted garage. He was working on the possibility that artificial progesterone doses could stop ovulation and therefore pregnancy in the way natural progesterone stops ovulation when a woman gets pregnant.

Then came the sustained-reaction convergence that would produce the explosion of the pill. Margaret Sanger got a letter from her old friend and supporter, Katharine McCormick, asking how she could use

her money to support the development of contraceptives. Sanger told her about Pincus, whose work she knew through Planned Parenthood. McCormick went to Worcester to meet him.

Meanwhile Pincus needed a medical doctor, preferably a gynecologist, to help him find women as test subjects for progesterone. Having blamed his Harvard firing in part on anti-Semitism, he hesitated to bring another Jew into the project. He turned to John Rock, who looked like “a family physician from central casting.” Better yet, he was a Catholic. His patients came to him because they were infertile. He was already treating them with hormones.

Another partner was the G.D. Searle pharmaceutical company. They quietly funded Pincus, and he quietly chose their synthetic progesterone over that of a rival.

Rock and Pincus faced a Massachusetts law against all forms of contraception, and so they lied about their intentions and billed their testing of Rock's patients as research into fertility. The Rock patients would stick with all the biopsies, urine tests, Pap smears and side effects, but their usefulness was limited by the fact that they were trying to have babies, not prevent them. And there weren't enough of them.

Pincus turned to women in a snake-pit Worcester mental hospital. They had no choice but to participate. For permission from the hospital, McCormick gave money to paint and refurbish some of the wards, but the women, in their madness, turned out to be unreliable.

Pincus sought test subjects in Puerto Rico and Haiti. He thought he had found them in Dr. David Tyler's female medical students at the University of Puerto Rico. Tyler told them “they were required as part of their coursework to enroll in the clinical trial and if any of them stopped taking the pills and submitting to the urine tests, temperature readings, and Pap smears, he would ‘hold it against her when considering grades.’ ” They all stopped anyway.

By 1957, Pincus had been able to test the pill on only 130 women, not

enough persuade the FDA. So he used a different statistic to describe the same tests, saying the results came from 1,279 menstrual cycles. This sounded more impressive. The FDA approved Enovid as a treatment for infertility and menstrual irregularities. Three years later, it was approved as a contraceptive, and in 1965 the Supreme Court invalidated bans on the use of contraceptives in *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

Around the time of its approval, a Searle official told the Associated Press that the pill's function was "to interfere with the production of the ova in the same way nature does after a woman becomes pregnant." John Rock would make the same argument to the Vatican. The church was unmoved, but a lot of Catholic women, perhaps persuaded by Rock, wanted the pill anyway.

A miracle of science became ordinary overnight. The pill was taken for granted in the manner of the microchip, moon landings or the automobile. The American birthrate fell. The age of marriage rose. The number of female law and business students soared. The crusade to control conception continues with long-term implants of contraceptives that require no daily attention.

As for the cultural change the pill provoked, new sexual mores are still a hot topic but so were old ones throughout history.

More important was the speed of the change. In 1967, Time magazine put the pill on its cover and said: "In a mere six years it has changed and liberated the sex and family life of a large and still growing segment of the U.S. population; eventually, it promises to do the same for much of the world." If change can happen that fast, who knows what shock will alter our lives and beliefs tomorrow? Look at the speed with which we've accepted same-sex marriage and childbirth outside of marriage. What was sin is now an empowerment, an entitlement.

Loretta Lynn understood: "There's gonna be some changes made . . . 'cause now I've got the pill."

—Mr. Allen, a former writer and editor for the Washington Post, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2000.



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