

**Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood.**  
Kristen Luker. *California: University of California, 1984.*

In this book Kristen Luker presents a convincing and useful descriptive analysis of the development of the abortion debate up to the nineteen-sixties. However, her political analysis of the issue in the years since then is much less successful.

The author shows that the right-to-life movement in the mid-nineteenth century was spearheaded by physicians, not out of any deep feeling for the sanctity of life, but because it was an ideal issue to enable the still weak profession to claim moral and scientific superiority over opposing schools of health. This movement successfully established abortion as a medical issue and defined doctors as the group with the physical resources and expertise to make decisions which involved weighing two lives.

The large physical risks of pregnancy and the fact that much health care, including abortions, was provided at home kept widely different views of abortion and different practices hidden for almost a century. As more abortions came to be performed in hospitals and new medical knowledge vastly reduced the physical risks, abortion became a public political issue. In California, the first move to reform abortion law came from professionals in the nineteen fifties and early sixties who sought to have their broad construction of the grounds for abortion explicitly codified in law. They did not want to change general medical practice. They sought rather, to protect established and widely accepted practice from the possibility of legal challenge from the minority of strict constructionists in the profession.

In the late 1960's, a more grass roots challenge to abortion law came from activist women whose focus was not primarily the inadequacy of the law governing legal abortions, but the horrors

of illegal abortion. They sought repeal rather than reform of the law and were concerned not merely to clarify the medical grounds for abortion but to challenge the medical profession's right to control these decisions. The author links women's increasing concern to control their own reproduction to changing social conditions. These conditions which reduced the importance of childbearing in women's lives and opened the possibility and necessity of their involvement in the labour force resulted in greatly increased costs of unintended pregnancy. Women who had earlier been active reformers apparently accepted this radical redefinition of the issue more easily than male reformers and joined in what became a largely female grass roots movement. With this, says Luker, activism broadened beyond the professions, collegial restraint was lost, the stakes rose and the issue gained new and powerful "symbolic" content.

In 1973, when U.S. Supreme Court decisions struck down all previous abortion laws, a largely female grass roots right-to-life movement was galvanized that was also very different from the earlier, largely professional opposition to broad construction. Kristen Luker provides convincing evidence that these women, or at least the core activists among them had, on the whole, made traditional life choices very different from pro-choice activists. She suggests they were deeply threatened by a position which seemed to devalue their way of life as mothers because it argued that motherhood was one possible choice for women rather than the meaning of their lives.

The author does a good job of tracing the impact of social, economic, technological and political factors on the emergence and shaping of the early abortion debate. But her analysis of the current period is limited by her decision to examine right-to-life and pro-choice women activists in isolation from the wider political arena and other participants in the "debate."

This leaves the misleading impression that these are simply two parallel women's groups. It overlooks the significant political fact that one side of the debate was defined autonomously by women claiming power over the abortion decision for themselves. The other side defends the power of the Church, the State and the medical profession over this decision. Luker makes the interesting point that women's different positions on abortion are related to different perceptions of their real interests stemming from different life choices. But in making it she fails to explore the qualitative difference between a dependent, defensive self-interest vested in maintaining male power and an independent self-interest in women gaining power over their own lives.

Although she notes that the abortion issue has been transformed to include a challenge to men's control over women's reproduction she does not deal with this new and real struggle for power in her analysis. Because she does not include men and male groups and organizations in her description of the debate she cannot deal with these central questions of power in her analysis.

She presents, instead, an essentially pressure group analysis of two parallel groups of women activists for whom rational behaviour would involve an attempt to "capture the middle ground" (228). This middle ground, she says, accepts both the "necessity" of abortion on a number of grounds and its policing by "society" and medical, parental and spousal authorities. Yet, strangely, neither group is following the logic of pressure group politics. Commitment to the absolute personhood of the foetus or the absolute personhood of women is non-negotiable for each. Neither group is likely to "win" in the narrow terms within which Kristen Luker views the "debate." And yet the author's framework cannot encompass this possibility. Instead, she ascribes the lack of "calm and reasoned discourse" (244) and the apparently irrational group behaviour to the symbolic significance of

this issue for women whose different life situations leave them vulnerable in different ways.

Despite her demonstration that women's position on abortion is closely related to their general world view, she does *not* examine the complex and central place of the debate in the general conservative/authoritarian, liberal/progressive and feminist political programmes that embody these world views. The most compelling political questions remain off bounds. How, for instance, did abortion become, for right-to-life-activists, a single issue overriding all other moral and life issues, including nuclear annihilation, war, oppression and poverty? And how has it become the linchpin, in both Canada and the U.S., of a mounting right wing attack on all progressive ideas? The recent Canadian federal election saw advertisements from anti-choice groups across the country urging support for the Conservative party even though it does not have a right-to-life policy. In the United States' election the issue was used to benefit Ronald Reagan.

The book, although repetitively written, provides a wealth of information about the early abortion debate and current female activists in California and is valuable on those grounds. But this information does not provide a sufficient basis for the political analysis that the book's title claims.

A. Rose

**Island Women: Our Prose and Poetry.** L. Brehaut, B. Epperley, G. King, L. Oughten, J.L. Turner. *Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1982. Pp. 128.*

The tough and innovative Ragweed Press again deserves praise for publishing yet another collection from local artists. This slim volume, *Island Women: Our Prose and Poetry*, contains poetry and prose by some forty-nine P.E.I.