Stopes [married name Roe], Marie Charlotte Carmichael (1880–1958), sexologist and advocate of birth control
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Stopes [married name Roe], Marie Charlotte Carmichael (1880–1958), sexologist and advocate of birth control, was born at 3 Abercromby Place, Edinburgh, on 15 October 1880, the elder daughter of Henry Stopes (c.1852–1902), an architect from a wealthy brewing family who was interested in archaeology, and his wife, Charlotte Brown Carmichael Stopes (1840–1929), a Shakespearian scholar and promoter of women’s education. Stopes later described herself as a ‘child of the British Association’, at which her parents met.

Early life and education
Marie was brought up in a rather dour and puritanical intellectual atmosphere, and dressed according to the tenets of the Rational Dress Society of which her mother was a strong supporter (in later life remaining constant to the anti-corset creed). Initially educated at home by her mother, in 1892 Stopes was sent to St George’s High School, Edinburgh, and, two years later, following the family’s move to Hampstead, to the North London Collegiate School.

Influenced by her father’s scientific interests from an early age, when she helped him wash and catalogue hundreds of flints, Stopes chose to take a science degree at University College, London. She distinguished herself during her university career both academically (winning the gold medal in botany in her first year) and socially, as president of the Women’s Debating Society, where she introduced events in which both sexes took part. Stopes achieved her goal of obtaining the BSc in two years with double honours (first class in botany and third in geology), in 1902.

Career in palaeobotany
Stopes went on to a remarkably successful scientific career in palaeobotany, the study of fossil plants, publishing two learned articles even before undertaking postgraduate studies at the Botanical Institute in Munich, supported by the Gilchrist scholarship. The only woman among five hundred men, Stopes completed and defended her thesis (in German) within the year, becoming the first woman in Munich to take a PhD in botany. In 1904 Stopes was appointed assistant lecturer in botany at Manchester University, another first for a woman. In 1905 she became the youngest doctor of science in Britain. She was invited to prepare the catalogue of cretaceous flora for the geological department of the British Museum (natural history), participated in international discussions, went down coalmines in pursuit of fossil plants, and wrote a textbook on plant life for young people. In 1907 the Royal Society awarded her a grant for palaeobotanical research in Japan. Stopes spent two years at the University of Tokyo, and undertook several adventurous expeditions. Her prolific scientific writings ranged from learned monographs to popular accounts. She was elected a fellow of the Linnean Society, and lectured widely to academic and lay audiences. In
1910 Stopes was elected a fellow of University College, London. Later the same year she was invited by the Canadian government to make a study of carboniferous flora in the coal beds of New Brunswick.

**First marriage, 1911–1916**

Stopes's professional success was not paralleled in her emotional life. In Munich she made the acquaintance of Kenjiro Fujii, a Japanese professor fourteen years her senior, and their friendship developed into something more romantic when he continued his studies in London. However, during Stopes's sojourn in Japan the affair went wrong, thwarting her hopes of marriage. Her fictionalized version of events, *Love-Letters of a Japanese*, under the pseudonym G. N. Mortlake, appeared in 1910 (her experience of Japan and its culture also bore fruit in *A Journal from Japan*, 1910, which contains an account of her travels, translations of Noh plays, and an article on the subject in collaboration with Joji Sakurai). In the aftermath of this débâcle, Stopes had a number of unsatisfactory and inconclusive relationships. In 1910, having reached thirty, increasingly desperate to experience marriage and motherhood, she met a Canadian botanist, Reginald Ruggles Gates, who was two years her junior, at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. They were married in Montreal on 18 March 1911.

After returning to London, Stopes issued a circular letter informing friends and acquaintances that she would keep her own name. She had declared her allegiance to women's suffrage in a letter to *The Times* in 1910 and she was a member of the Women's Freedom League (rather than the more militant Women's Social and Political Union which her mother supported). She supported the Married Women's Taxation Reform League and opposed the imposition of marriage bars to women's employment. However, although she had ambitions to become a social reformer as well as a scientist, she wanted a cause more universal than that of suffrage.

Stopes's marriage appeared to be a great success, but rifts soon appeared: she was appointed to a lectureship in palaeobotany at University College while Gates could find no post commensurate with his qualifications. Stopes developed a flirtatious friendship with Aylmer Maude, a married writer and translator twenty-two years her senior, who, early in 1913, became a lodger with the couple in their Hampstead cottage. Whether the marriage was unconsummated, as Stopes successfully persuaded the court which granted her an annulment in 1916, is still rather moot. She claimed to have married in complete ignorance of the physical practicalities of sex, and, concerned at her failure to become pregnant, enlightened herself by studying the learned tomes in the ‘Cupboard’ of the British Museum reading room. A statement by Ruggles Gates placed in the department of manuscripts of the British Library by his widow tells a rather different, though not necessarily more plausible, story.

**Married Love and second marriage, 1918**

In 1910 Stopes had written a treatise on marriage (unpublished and since lost), possibly idealistic and theoretical rather than practical. By 1914 she was already working on a manuscript based on her sexological researches, and observation and analysis of her own sexual feelings. In 1915 she met the American birth control campaigner Margaret Sanger, who had fled to England to avoid imprisonment for disseminating contraceptive information, and Stopes was active in getting up a petition to President Woodrow Wilson to drop the charges against Sanger. The two women later wrote differing accounts of this encounter, but it seems probable that
Sanger passed on the up-to-date information about rubber pessaries she had gained from European experts. Through her contacts with the birth control movement Stopes met Humphrey Verdon Roe (1878–1949), son of Edwin Hodgson Roe, a surgeon. Roe was a wealthy young officer in the Royal Flying Corps, who, along with his brother Sir Alliott Verdon-Roe, was involved in the manufacture of aircraft. Roe was also interested in promoting contraception and he put up the £200 required by the small firm of Fifield & Co. to publish Stopes’s manuscript. Published early in 1918, *Married Love* became a runaway best-seller, generating a huge correspondence. In November *Wise Parenthood* appeared, dealing explicitly with contraception (only implied in *Married Love*). Meanwhile the feelings between Stopes and Lieutenant Roe had ripened, and in spite of his pre-existing engagement to another, they were married on 16 May 1918. By the end of the year Stopes was, to her delight, pregnant.

### Birth control campaigner and coal scientist, 1918–1921

Although Stopes was fast approaching forty, she did not moderate her hectic round of lecturing, writing (including a short pamphlet, *A Letter to Working Mothers* (1919), explaining birth control in simple language and terms suited to the circumstances of poor women), travelling, dealing with her enormous correspondence, dashing off letters to the newspapers, and joining the deliberations of the National Birth Rate Commission. She still pursued her researches on the composition of coal, undertaken as her war work, at the Home Office experimental station at Eskmeals, Cumberland, at University College, and in a makeshift home laboratory. She published several important papers on the subject and her nomenclature for the four constituents of coal (vitrain, clarain, durain, and fusain) became standard usage. Although she resigned from University College in 1920 Stopes did not abandon research. Her interest in coal took some rather bizarre turns: during the 1921 mining dispute she offered herself as a mediator, and she did her best to intervene during the general strike of 1926 on the miners’ behalf. She also believed that coal fires exuded beneficent rays and took ‘coal baths’ (in the nude) in front of them.

On 16 July 1919, following a labour under the new twilight sleep method of analgesia, Stopes’s first child, a son, was stillborn, the result, she averred, of the ineptitude of her medical attendants. Barely nine months later she was back in a whirl of diverse activities, having moved into a larger and more elegant house, Givons Grove, in Leatherhead, with a laboratory and a music room. In 1920 she published an inexpensive booklet, *The Truth about V.D.*, as well as *Radiant Motherhood*, an obvious sequel to her earlier works. Stopes also claimed to have received a direct message from God under a yew tree near her home telling her to inform the bishops at the Lambeth conference of the message (published as *A New Gospel to All Peoples*, 1922) that marital intercourse was not intended solely for the procreation of children. The revelation was greeted with silence by the bishops, but Stopes none the less sent out a questionnaire concerning family limitation to 2000 clergymen.

### Birth control clinic, 1921

Early in 1921 Stopes and Humphrey Roe inaugurated a birth control clinic in Upper Holloway, north London, a poor working-class area, staffed by trained nurses with a woman doctor available for cases requiring medical examination. Stopes had strong views on the type of contraception to be provided, advocating the small ‘Pro-race’ (later ‘Racial’) rubber pessary of her own design, except when demonstrable difficulties required the larger Dutch cap, or female condom. Opposed to fitting
unmarried women, she advised the use of a condom during the early weeks of marriage as a temporary expedient. She took considerable pains to find reliable suppliers, deploring the shoddy nature of most contraceptive devices on the market.

On 31 May 1921 Stopes made the first move in a campaign to make birth control respectable with a mass meeting at the Queen's Hall, London, attended by distinguished medical, political, literary, and artistic sponsors. Before a packed audience, she emphasized the positive aim of 'healthy, happy, desired, babies'. Negative though much of the response was, she aroused discussion of the subject and breached the silence of taboo. A Society for Constructive Birth Control was set up with Stopes as president.

**Stopes v. Sutherland, 1923**

In 1922 a Roman Catholic convert doctor, Halliday Sutherland, wrote of a 'Doctor of German Philosophy' whose clinic in the London slums gave pernicious advice to working women. Stopes sued him for libel. However, she was less than supportive towards two concurrent causes célèbres involving birth control: the dismissal of Nurse Elizabeth Daniels from her post as a health visitor in Edmonton, Middlesex, for giving contraceptive advice, and the prosecution of Guy Aldred and Rose Witcop for selling Margaret Sanger's pamphlet *Family Limitation*; this alienated some sympathizers. The *Stopes v. Sutherland* trial which began early in 1923 gave massive amounts of publicity both to Stopes herself and to her cause; some of her critics later claimed that this was her aim, given the obscurity of Sutherland's book. She was subjected to derogatory remarks by Sutherland's counsel and witnesses, and hostility from the judge, Lord Chief Justice Hewart. The verdict was confusing and inconclusive. The jury found Sutherland's remarks true but defamatory and recommended damages. Hewart, however, entered judgment with costs for Sutherland. Stopes appealed. Undeterred in promoting the cause of 'Babies in the Right Place', she wrote the script for a film, *Maisie's Marriage*, which the censor tried, but failed, to ban, and published the textbook *Contraception* (1923).

**Motherhood and mothers' clinics, 1924–1926**

In 1924 Stopes achieved two ambitions: her son, Harry, was born on 27 March (*The Times* refused to accept the announcement), and she was presented at court (after making it clear that her first marriage had been dissolved by annulment, not divorce), though to her chagrin she was presented as Mrs Humphrey Verdon Roe. In 1925 the mothers' clinic moved to more central premises at Whitfield Street (where a Marie Stopes clinic still exists), and began training sessions for nurses and the medical profession. Several provincial clinics were established, as well as a caravan clinic with a trained nurse which travelled round the country. In 1926 Stopes undertook an undercover mission to the gynaecology clinic at the Royal Free Hospital disguised as Marian Parker, a charwoman, and found Professor Louise McIlroy, who had testified for Sutherland during the trial, fitting (very badly) the occlusive caps she professed to abhor.

**Later years and writings**

The rest of Stopes's life never quite recovered the glory of the period 1918–25, when she became a household name. Her views grew increasingly dogmatic and her difficulties in co-operating with other workers in the birth control movement (she seceded from the National Birth Control Association in the early 1930s) led her into an ever more isolated position. Her antipathy to the medical profession and her
paranoia about Roman Catholics were not without some basis. However, from the
undoubted hostility which existed she imagined conspiracies everywhere, even in the
court order to destroy her beloved chow, Wuffles, for attacking other dogs. She was
perhaps over-litigious. Her later works never matched the success of Married Love
and Wise Parenthood; from Enduring Passion (1928) onwards her prescriptions for
sexual difficulties tended to rely more and more on physical remedies (hormone
extracts and electrotherapy). Following the birth of her son there was a growing
estrangement from Humphrey, and sexual difficulties within the marriage were
attributed to a flying injury acquired during the First World War. Harry remained the
only child, but Stopes made a number of ill-fated attempts at adopting young
companions for him.

Stopes had long nursed literary ambitions, and had already published poetry and
written plays (Our Ostriches, on a birth control theme, ran for three months at the
Royal Court Theatre in 1923), novels, and short stories. In 1928 her only published
novel, Love's Creation, by 'Marie Carmichael', failed to achieve the success she
believed it deserved. A play for children, Buckie's Bears, dictated to her, she claimed,
by Harry, was produced during the London Christmas season for several years.
During the following decades she devoted herself increasingly to literary pursuits
though she was still closely involved in the production of updated new editions of her
existing works. Unfortunately, although she was an extremely good writer in many
ways, capable of pitching her tone accurately to very diverse audiences, able to
express herself with clarity, rewriting even letters to get them right, her self-
consciously literary efforts were much less successful than her other writings, and her
poems were often embarrassing.

Stopes was anxious to form literary friendships but most of the lions she pursued
tended to keep an arm's length distance, even while accepting her hospitality at
Norbury Park, the mansion at Dorking which she purchased in 1933. In 1938, aged
fifty-eight, she met Keith Briant, a youthful poet, with whom she enjoyed (at least) an
intense amitié amoureuse, and to whom she addressed passionate poems. Around
the same time Humphrey presented her with a note (possibly dictated by her)
granting her carte blanche to take a lover. A paradoxical friendship developed with
Lord Alfred Douglas (Oscar Wilde's 'Bosie', and a Roman Catholic convert), for whom
she made strenuous efforts to obtain a civil-list pension.

Stopes's later years were sad. In 1947 Harry announced his engagement to Mary,
dughter of the inventor Barnes Wallis. Marie objected furiously, claiming that Mary
had a hereditary defect, myopia, requiring her to wear spectacles. This led to deep
estrangement between mother and son, with only partial reconciliation before her
death. At seventy-two Stopes developed a passion for Avro Manhattan, an artist and
writer over thirty years her junior.

**Stopes's legacy**

As a scientist, Stopes is still a figure of some interest. Her major claim to fame,
however, rests on her work as birth control advocate and sex educator. She played a
unique and essential role in publicizing contraception and making it a topic for
discussion. She created a new genre of marriage manual with Married Love, a book
which literally changed lives. If she sometimes rated her own achievements rather
more highly than they deserved (ignoring or scorning the contributions of others),
nevertheless they were a remarkable contribution to human happiness.
Of recent years Stopes has been much decried for eugenicist views. A member of the Eugenics Society for many years (she left it her clinics lest they should fall into the hands of the Family Planning Association), like many of her contemporaries she held strong views about good and bad breeding. However, she argued that the majority of women, given the chance to space their pregnancies, would bear healthier children and rear them better. Moreover, the effect of her eugenicist views on the practice within her clinics, and on the advice she gave to correspondents, seems minimal: her sympathy towards individual cases often contradicted her public pronouncements.

**Appearance and personality**

In her youth Stopes was an attractive woman, somewhat under medium height, slender but full figured. She had copious reddish brown hair, and her large hazel eyes were her most striking feature, having an almost magnetic quality. Her clothes were floating and romantic, neither severe nor slavishly following contemporary fashions. Press reports at the time of her greatest notoriety emphasized the femininity of her dress and general demeanour. She claimed to remain psychologically twenty-six years old. She rejected formal Christianity, though she had some sympathy with the Society of Friends, and believed herself to have had personal communication with the Deity. When not in her prophetic mode she could be a stimulating and even amusing companion. While her pursuit of distinguished individuals sometimes appears encroaching, she did have many friends among the great and good of her time. Her attitude towards the ordinary readers of her books who sought advice was remarkable for its sympathy, although she had never envisaged becoming a universal agony aunt when soliciting correspondence about the theories advanced in *Married Love*. While response was increasingly delegated to secretaries, she continued to read and annotate letters received and to add postscripts to form replies, often taking considerable trouble to provide help.

In 1957 Stopes was diagnosed as suffering from breast cancer. Told that the cancer was too far advanced for surgery, she pursued dubious cures and underwent homoeopathic treatment at a Bavarian clinic. In spite of her claims that she would live to be 120, she died at Norbury Park on 2 October 1958. She was cremated and her ashes scattered at Portland Bill by her son and Avro Manhattan. A memorial service was held at St Martin-in-the-Fields on what would have been her seventy-eighth birthday. Norbury Park, and the residue of her estate, less a few bequests, were left to the Royal Society of Literature.

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recording · BL NSA, ‘Birth control in the 1920s’, NP6084 W TR1

Likenesses photograph, c.1911–1918, UCL · E. Kapp, drawing, 1929, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham · D. Low, pencil caricature, c.1933, NPG · G. Kelly, oils, 1953, NPG [see illus.] · A. John, portrait, NPG · G. Prieto, oils, NG Scot. · photographs, BL · photographs, priv. coll. · two portraits, Royal Society of Literature

Wealth at death £29,007 14s. 7d.: probate, 3 March 1959, CGPLA Eng. & Wales

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