

Marie Charlotte Carmichael Stopes (1880-1958) ^[1]

By: DuPont, Ellen M. Keywords: [Biography](#) ^[2] [Contraception](#) ^[3] [Reproductive rights](#) ^[4]

[Marie Charlotte Carmichael Stopes](#) ^[5] was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 15 October 1880 to [Charlotte Carmichael Stopes](#) ^[6], a suffragist, and [Henry Stopes](#) ^[7], an archaeologist and anthropologist. A paleobotanist best known for her social activism in the area of sexuality, Stopes was a pioneer in the fight to gain sexual equality for women. Her activism took many forms including writing books and pamphlets, giving public appearances, serving on panels, and, most famously, co-founding the first [birth control](#) ^[8] clinic in the United Kingdom.

Stopes attended [University College](#) ^[9], London, where she completed a double honors degree in botany and geology. She then traveled to Munich, Germany, to continue her education. After obtaining her PhD in botany from the [University of Munich](#) ^[10] in 1904, Stopes returned to Britain and became the first woman to work on Manchester University's science staff, as a lecturer in botany. She worked abroad several times early in her scientific career, traveling to Japan in 1907 and the US and Canada in 1911, in both cases to pursue research in botany. She published scientific articles on cretaceous flora and popular works on Japanese culture before returning to her *alma mater*, the [University College](#) ^[9], London, in 1914, where she was a lecturer until 1920.

While her academic career was gaining steam, Stopes's personal life was foundering. She was involved in an ultimately fruitless affair with a Japanese colleague, and then married Reginald Ruggles Gates, a Canadian geneticist, in 1911. The marriage fell apart and was annulled in 1916. The failure of her first marriage seemed to be the turning point in Stopes's life, prompting her to write her first book, [Married Love](#) ^[11]. Her open and unabashed discussion of female sexuality and the importance of sexual relations as part of a happy marriage catapulted her into public awareness and began her career as a social activist. She married [Humphrey Verdon Roe](#) ^[12], the wealthy co-founder of an aircraft firm, in 1918, the same year [Married Love](#) ^[11] was published. Stopes's scientific career continued throughout her life, consisting mostly of private research and consulting in botany and coal composition after leaving [University College](#) ^[9]. Although she never stopped doing science, her resignation in 1920 was largely due to a desire to spend more time engaged in social activism.

[Married Love](#) ^[11] was enormously successful, both in sales and in generating controversy. It went completely unmentioned in *The Times*—one of the leading newspapers in Britain—though thousands of letters streamed in from readers thanking her for tackling a previously taboo subject. Wasting little time, Stopes followed up with another book, [Wise Parenthood](#) ^[13], a treatise on and guide to the use of various forms of [birth control](#) ^[8] and [contraception](#) ^[14], from condoms to cervical caps. The book was one of the only resources available to women on the topic, but her confident advice in the absence of a medical background angered some. The oppositional response to [Wise Parenthood](#) ^[13] culminated in the first of several legal battles Stopes fought, both as plaintiff and defendant, throughout her career as an activist. She was involved in two libel suits, first as accuser and then as the accused. She was the plaintiff in her first court battle in 1923, an accusation of libel against Dr. [Halliday Sutherland](#) ^[15] for comments made in his book insinuating that her [birth control](#) ^[8] work was practically criminal. The case served in part as a trial of Stopes and her cause because it was an investigation of whether Sutherland's attack was valid. The jury agreed that the libelous words were defamatory and substantively true, but that they were not fair comment. Though the judge interpreted this ruling in favor of Sutherland, it was portrayed in the media as a success for Stopes.

In 1919 Stopes faced a devastating development in her personal life with the delivery of a stillborn child, but she was not deterred from publishing yet another book, [Radiant Motherhood](#) ^[16], in 1920. The book's publication preceded the birth of her only child, son Harry Verdon Stopes-Roe, by four years. The same year he was born, she published [Contraception \(Birth Control\): Its Theory^{\[17\]}, History and Practice; A Manual for the Medical and Legal Professions](#) which was widely held to be the most comprehensive volume on the subject to date. All of Stopes's books sold well, but she is perhaps best known for co-founding the Mothers' Clinic with her husband in 1921. Located in north London, it was the first [family planning](#) ^[18] clinic ever established in the UK. The couple founded the clinic with the goals of helping the poor, making [birth control](#) ^[8] more widely available, and gathering scientific data on [contraception](#) ^[14] and women's sexuality. In 1925 the practice moved to another location in central London, and close to a century later the original clinic is still in operation there. It has been expanded and reorganized into [Marie Stopes International](#) ^[19], a not-for-profit health [organization](#) ^[20] that operates in almost forty countries.

An avid eugenicist throughout her life, Stopes firmly believed that uncontrolled reproduction among the lower classes was hurting society as couples of low socioeconomic status bore babies that she contended were simply inferior. She was a strong supporter of [sterilization](#) ^[21] as a means of putting society on the path towards making more perfect human beings. When it became clear that such policies would never be implemented, she turned to [contraception](#) ^[14] as the next best way to stem the rampant reproduction of the working class. Stopes never lost her enthusiasm for her quest to perfect the race and left her [birth control](#) ^[8] clinic to the Eugenics Society upon her death.

Less than a year after being diagnosed with breast cancer, Marie Stopes died on 2 October 1958, just short of her seventy-eighth birthday. Her career began as a purely scientific foray into paleobotany but eventually broadened to encompass numerous forms of social activism including writing, public speaking, attending committees and meetings, and establishing clinics. Her writing was both scholarly and popular, including scientific papers as well as several books on sexuality and numerous other poems, plays, and novels. Stopes's impact on the [evolution](#) ^[22] of sex education and women's sexual equality is difficult to overestimate. She networked with other activists throughout Britain including celebrities, politicians, and doctors, as well as with other activists overseas, most notably her American counterpart Margaret Sanger. She also made her share of enemies, among them the Church of England, which took issue with her stance that sex had value in and of itself, not just as a means for [procreation](#) ^[23]. Marie Stopes played a large part in revolutionizing views on sexuality and [birth control](#) ^[8] both in Britain and elsewhere in the world. In 1999 she was voted Woman of the Millennium by readers of the UK newspaper *The Guardian*.

Sources

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