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Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century America: A View from Three Contemporaries

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Social, philosophical and technical aspects of birth control in nineteenth-century America are examined through the lives and thoughts of three men who lived and worked at that time: John Humphrey Noyes, Anthony Comstock and Edward Bliss Foote.

The desire to control procreation is not new to modern man; it has been a universal characteristic of human social life. Among preliterate societies infanticide and abortion were the principal means of population control. But, it is noteworthy that ingenious, quasi-rational contraceptive techniques did develop early and found wide acceptance. *Coitus interruptus,* well-known in Biblical times (1), was long the practice of such dissimilar groups as the Masai of Africa and the Karo-Batak of Sumatra. Martinique Negresses douched with lemon juice following coitus, while Achehnese women used tampons moistened with tannic acid. Primitive Australian males submitted to *Koolpi,* an operation whereby the urethra was slit to permit the semen to dribble down over the scrotum during ejaculation (2).

Nineteenth-century America was hardly an exception to this ageless trend. But, this "infant state in the midst of raw nature" (3), with its staunch Victorian morals and conservative puritan ethics, provided a unique atmosphere wherein rational and bizarre approaches to birth control compliantly coexisted. These attempts to prevent "a too rapid increase of offspring" (22) were condemned as lustful by those pietistic paladins of purity, the vice-crusaders.

Portraits of three characters who are representative of those divergent forces which have made the drama of contraception in nineteenth-century America so alluring are the concern of this report.

I. JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES (1811–1886)

> We are a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson
> Letter to Thomas Carlyle (1840) (3)

Some 500 Utopian communities existed in nineteenth-century America. Although a few sects (e.g., the polygynous Mormons) objected to any form of birth control,

and exhorted their women to fulfill their God-given responsibility to bear children, most communes advocated some form of population control. The Rappites of Indiana, the Zoarites of Ohio, the Ephrataites of Pennsylvania, the Jemimakins and Inspirationists of New York—all preached celibacy (3). Adhering to the Biblical admonition that "It is good for man not to touch woman" (4), systems of theology were developed which made celibacy mandatory for eternal salvation. It was believed that a complete conversion to spiritual intentions would serve as a deterrent to fleshly desires. The Rappites boasted that their members were so well-indoctrinated that a man and woman could share the same bed and not be tempted to have conjugal relations.

Celibacy was effective! The Zanesville, Ohio "Gazette" reported that after 50 years of communal life the Separatist Society of Zoar represented the anomaly "of a village without a single child to be seen or heard within its limits" (5).

Perhaps the most revolutionary social experiment associated with the communitarian movements of the nineteenth century was that of "complex marriage" encompassing "male continence," as propounded by John Humphrey Noyes.

Noyes, born in 1811 at Brattleboro, Vermont, was reared in the finest tradition of puritan ethics. He was graduated from Dartmouth College and studied theology at Yale. While at New Haven, he developed a novel way to salvation: the doctrine of Perfectionism, a total cessation from sin. In 1835 Noyes organized a Perfectionist colony at Putney, Vermont, and within eight years thirty-five people claimed conversion to his social theory.

Although originally espousing celibacy, Noyes married Harriet Holton, his most ardent follower. This formal arrangement was not intended to limit the range of their affections, however. Noyes gave his bride liberty to "love all who love God . . . as freely as if she stood in no particular connection" with him (6). George and Mary Cragin soon joined the Noyes in a group marriage. In 1846 this quartet was expanded to include Noyes' sisters, Charlotte and Harriet and their husbands, John Miller and John Skinner. Thus began complex marriage. Complex marriage was a pantagamous arrangement where each male was married to each female. Noyes justified complex marriage on theological grounds. Eternal salvation was the ultimate goal of the Perfectionist, and the abolition of monogamous marital ties was the first step in a progression toward that goal. The practice of complex marriage at Putney created a storm of protest, and Noyes was arrested in October 1847, charged with adultery and released on a $2000 bond. Rather than become a martyr, Noyes chose to jump bail. He fled with his disciples to a site on Oneida Creek, New York.

Quickly the size of the Oneida group doubled. Noyes now realized that his system of complex marriage, without some form of birth control, would multiply the Oneida population such that there would be a severe economic strain on their limited resources. Although Noyes was familiar with Robert Dale Owen's "Moral Physiology" and Charles Knowlton's "The Fruits of Philosophy," he disapproved of coitus interruptus because it was condemned in the Bible. He rejected contraceptives as "those tricks of the French voluptuaries" (7). Instead, in 1848 he introduced "male continence," which would permit the enjoyment of the sexual act while lowering the risk of an unwanted pregnancy. In essence, male continence consisted of normal intromission and movements without ejaculation. Noyes claimed that when detumescence occurred intravaginally, in the absence of ejaculation, there were no harmful effects (8). Noyes stated that the sex organs served

two distinct functions in the act of love: an amative function and a propagative function. He regarded the former as superior to the latter. Eve was originally created for amative purposes. Her propagative office emerged only after she had sinned. Because of her transgression God said, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (9). Noyes insisted that ejaculation was within one's voluntary control. Modern studies in human sexual behavior have confirmed that orgasm may occur without the emission of semen. Such happens among adult males who deliberately constrict their genital muscles during coitus interruptus. These males experience real orgasm, which they have no difficulty recognizing, even if it is without ejaculation (10).

Male continence was not foolproof. Thirty children were accidentally conceived at Oneida during the first two decades of the experiment.

The Oneida community, like its predecessor at Putney, lived under constant attack from the outside. In 1879 Noyes was accused of statutory rape, because he had had sexual relations with several girls who were about thirteen years of age. Again Noyes elected to escape; this hegira was to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. Once the charismatic leadership of Noyes had departed, Oneida lost its *raison d'être*. The community struggled under the inept leadership of Myron Kinsley until September, 1880, when it was disbanded. Oneida had failed, as did most Utopian colonies, because they attracted

> "the conceited, the crotchety, the selfish, the headstrong, the pugnacious, the unappreciated, the played out, the idle, the good-for-nothing, generally, who finding themselves utterly out of place and at discount in the world as it is, rashly concluded that they were exactly fitted for the world as it should be" (11).

II. ANTHONY COMSTOCK (1844–1915)

> Comstockery is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States.
>
> George Bernard Shaw (1905) (13)

In 1834 Sylvester Graham, the seventeenth child of the Rev. John Graham, Jr., of West Suffield, Connecticut, published his "Lecture to Young Men on Chastity." Herein he proposed a dietetic approach to lessen man's naturally lustful desires, claiming that meat, spices, sweets, coffee, tea and alcohol intensified the sexual drive. But, such wantonness could be curbed by the timely substitution of a vegetable diet (12).

Within a decade after the appearance of this book, on 7 March 1844, a male child was born to Thomas and Polly Lockwood Comstock at New Canaan, Connecticut, who was to outshadow Graham and become the most infamous vice-crusader in America's history. His name was Anthony Comstock.

Comstock showed his colors as a reformer early in life. At age eighteen, while employed as a grocery clerk at Winnipauk, Connecticut, he broke into a neighboring saloon, opened the liquor kegs and delighted to watch the evil spirits drain onto the floor (13). His ideas on vice quickly expanded to include the printed page; books and postcards were the roots of dissipation and revelry. They were the "feeders for brothels."

> This cursed business of obscene literature works beneath the surface, and like a canker worm, secretly eats out the moral life and purity of our youth, and they droop and fade before their parent's eyes. (14)

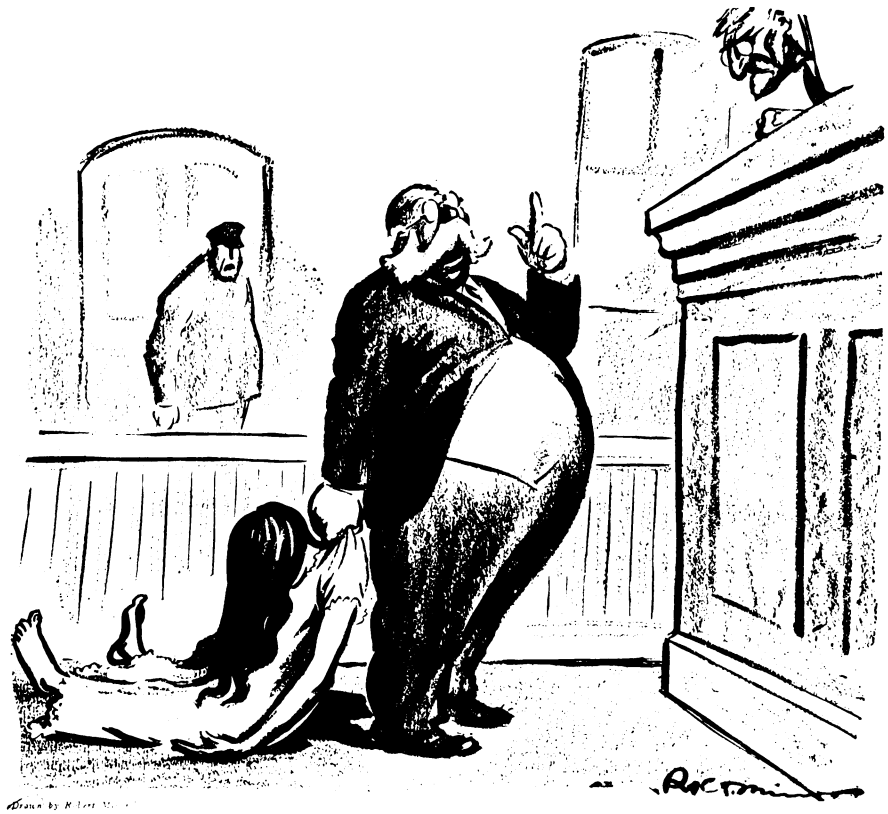

FIG. 1. A cartoon by Robert Minor which appeared in "The Masses," September 1915. It depicts Anthony Comstock, stout and bald, with gamboge whiskers, saying to the judge, "Your Honor, this woman gave birth to a naked child."

Comstock initiated court actions against Mrs. Victoria Woodhull and Miss Tennessee Claflin, publishers of Woodhull and Claflin's "Weekly," and Frank Leslie, editor of Leslie's "Weekly," under the Federal Obscenity Statutes of 1865 and 1872. Comstock was unsuccessful, and resolved to go to Washington to petition for stronger laws.

In January 1873 Comstock visited Congress with Rep. Clinton L. Merriam who had been influential in passing the Federal Statute of 1872. With additional help from Senator William A. Buckingham and counselor Benjamin Vaughan, a final bill was proposed which contained the following disastrous passage:

> No article, or thing, designed or intended, for the *prevention of conception* [italics mine], or notice of any kind in writing or print, giving information directly or indirectly, where or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the things before mentioned may be obtained or made, shall be carried in the mail (15).

The bill, later to be known as the Comstock law, passed the House at two o'clock on Sunday morning, 3 March 1873. It was speedily passed by the Senate the following day, and on 6 March 1873 was signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant.

An appendix to the bill, written by Senator William Windom, set aside appropriations for a special agent of the Postmaster General to enforce the new statute.

Offene

Volks-Sprache

über das

Menſchenſyſtem — Die Gewohnheiten der Männer und Frauen — Die Urſachen und Verhütung der Krankheiten — unſere geſchlechtlichen Beziehungen und ſociales Leben;

und

Geſunder Menſchen-Verſtand,

erläuternd

Urſachen, Verhütung und Heilung chroniſcher Krankheiten — Die natürlichen gegenſeitigen Beziehungen der Männer und Frauen-Geſellſchaft — Liebe — Ehe — Elternſtand — u. ſ. w., u. ſ. w.

von

Dr. EDWARD B. FOOTE.

Zweihundert Illuſtrationen.

Murray Hill Verlags-Handlung, 129 E. 28. St., N. Y. City

1890.

Fig. 2. Title page of the German edition of Edward Foote's "Plain Home Talk" embracing "Medical Common Sense" (1890).

Comstock, not unexpectedly, received this commission and left for New York City. Under his new badge of office he converted the Y.M.C.A.'s committee for the suppression of vice into the formidable organization named The Society for the Suppression of Vice. Comstock served as its secretary, while Samuel Colgate, the soap manufacturer, served as its president. Now powerful, Comstock was relentless in his pursuit of obscenity.

Mrs. Victoria Woodhull stated that

> From Maine to California we believe the new order of Protestant Jesuits, called the Y.M.C.A., is dubbed with the well-merited title of the American Inquisition . . . We do not mean by this to assert that its leaders are like those of the Spanish institution of the same character. We should no more think of comparing Comstock . . . with Torquemada, than of contrasting a living skunk with a dead lion (16).

Believing that the ends justified the means, Comstock used decoy letters and false signatures to gather evidence against people. As a result of a bogus letter (signed G. Brackett), a copy of Ezra Hervey Heywood's inoccuous *Cupid's Yokes* was mailed to Comstock by D. M. Bennett, a New York publisher. Bennett was tried under the Comstock law in March 1879 in the United States Circuit Court, Judge Charles L. Benedict presiding. Bennett was found guilty and was sentenced to thirteen months of hard labor at the Albany penitentiary. This episode eventually killed him.

At the turn of the century Comstock used his influence in an attempt to suppress George Bernard Shaw's play, "Mrs. Warren's Profession," calling Shaw an "Irish smut dealer." The play was held "not actionable" by the Court of Special Sessions. Comstock's behavior led Shaw to exclaim that this

> Confirms the deep-seated conviction of the old world that America is a provincial place, a second rate country town civilization after all (13).

In 1905 Shaw coined the word "Comstockery" to imply ludicrous prudery concerning immorality in books, papers, and pictures.

Comstock died ten years later, and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn. Two years before his death he had boasted:

> In the forty-one years I have been here I have convicted persons enough to fill a passenger train of sixty-one coaches, sixty coaches containing sixty passengers each and the sixty-first almost full. I have destroyed 160 tons of obscene literature (17).

III. EDWARD BLISS FOOTE (1829–1906)

> If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.
>
> Henry David Thoreau *Walden* (1854) Conclusion

"Dr. Edward Bliss Foote died yesterday at Larchmont . . . . He was a well-known eclectic physician in New York . . . author of "Medical Common Sense," "Plain Home Talk," "Science in Story" and the "Home Cyclopedia." For twenty years he . . . championed many reforms, social and medical" (18). Thus, so laconically, the end of a remarkable life was reported to the world. This brief obituary left too much unsaid.

Edward Foote's life began on 20 February, 1829, at Collamers, a village in the Western Reserve of Ohio settled by Connecticut folk of English lineage. His

father, Herschel Foote, gained local prominence as a postmaster. Little is known about his mother, Pamelia Foote, except that she was the adopted child of Jonathan and Hannah Bliss of Cleveland, Ohio (19).

At age fifteen Foote left school to become apprenticed to a printer at the Cleveland "Herald." During the next decade of his life his wanderings led him to positions with newspapers in New Haven and New Britain, Connecticut. Finally, Foote became associated with J. W. Heighway, editor and proprietor of the Brooklyn "Morning Journal." While engaged by this tabloid Foote gained the acquaintance of a local physician. Within two years he abandoned journalism and entered into medical practice with his preceptor (20).

Well-aware of the shortcomings of his training, Foote sought to extend his education. If his early schooling had been meagre, his medical studies were certainly first-rate. In 1860 he was graduated from Penn Medical University in Philadelphia, having submitted for his degree a thesis entitled "Electricity in Relation to the Human Organism" (21).

In 1864 Foote published a small volume entitled "Medical Common Sense." Herein he pioneered a complete approach to birth control by relating his philosophy on this delicate subject, an exposition of the faulty contraceptive methods commonly employed and complete details on the reliable devices—condom, glans condom and cervical diaphragm—which he recommended (22).

Foote wrote tirelessly, publishing a pamphlet on contraceptive technique, "Words in Pearl" (ca. 1870), and two works entitled "Plain Home Talk" (1871) and the "Home Cyclopedia" (1902) in which he delved into the social values to be derived from the general acceptance of birth control.

In "Plain Home Talk" Foote is critical of Noyes' bizarre method of contraception. Although Noyes claimed that male continence worked well in his pantagamous colony, Foote commented that such would not be the case in the "monogamic family, and for this reason it is the duty of the physician to advise everybody who wants counsel on this subject, and prescribe means which will effectively prevent conception . . ." (23).

In 1875, in response to the enactment of the Comstock law, Foote published a pamphlet "A Step Backward."

> The author has had to encounter . . . unfriendly legislation . . . in trying to educate the people . . . in the direction of perfect human reproduction. . . . If interested parties would best serve their own interest, they must employ all feasible means tending toward an extinction of these unjust and discriminated statutes, firmly forcing the issue. . . . I would advise every man and woman who has at heart the development of a more perfect humanity, to memorialize their legislatures—state and national—over their real names, if brave enough, or anonymously, if not, praying for a repeal of the objectionable features of the bills [Federal and New York State Comstock laws] upon which I have passed these criticisms. (24).

In June 1876 Foote was indicted under the Comstock law for distributing contraceptive information through the mails in his pamphlet "Words in Pearl" (25). In July the case was heard before Judge Charles L. Benedict of the United States Circuit Court. On 11 July 1876 Foote was found guilty and fined $3,500. A possible ten year prison sentence was suspended, because the Judge "understood many patients might suffer if a sentence of imprisonment was rendered" (26).

Edward Foote spent the rest of his life in a crusade for the acceptance by society of the need for effective birth control. He was a sincere and zealous neo-Malthusian

who "considered it an outrage to allow children to be born into unfit environment, or as unwelcome guests or from physically unfit parents simply because legalized bigotry makes it a crime to give information as to means for avoiding fecundation" (27).

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