Margery Spring Rice

Pioneer of Women’s Health in the Early Twentieth Century
5. Finding a Cause (1924–1931)

It was at this time, in the early years of Margery’s second marriage, that the cause to which she was to devote so much in the way of skill, time and energy for more than thirty years presented itself to her. Perhaps it was partly thanks to the stresses at home that she was so alert to the opportunity when it came her way. In that period, as is still the case today, the borough of Kensington included some of the poorest as well as some of the wealthiest areas of London. Margery was struck by the desperate need for facilities to improve the health of women and young children, and, in particular, by the need for the provision of contraceptive advice in the most deprived areas. Before the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948, panel doctors were available only to those with insurance — in effect, to the very group (employed men) that was least in need of them. Poor women and children were likely to suffer from malnutrition and the biggest killer of young women was tuberculosis. Despite the boost to female employment during the war, in 1921 it was back at its pre-war level,¹ to the detriment of income levels in the poorest households whose women were likely to have access only to the most casual forms of paid work.

Years later, Margery recalled how her eyes were opened:

One day early in 1924 Mrs Margaret Lloyd & Mrs Margery Spring Rice, who both lived in Kensington, were comparing notes about the domestic burdens of their respective charwomen, both of whom came from the very poor district of Notting Dale. At that time there was very little industry in North Kensington, and a great many of the inhabitants had casual work, such as window cleaning, street hawking, portering at Paddington Station; and a great majority of married women were adding to the poor earnings of their husbands by taking in washing from or charring in the well-to-do homes [at the other end of the borough].

To their ‘incredulous listeners’ the two charwomen ‘poured out their stories; they told us of the measures they had tried to limit their families, such as driving their husbands into the arms of another woman rather than take the “Saturday night risk”; jumping from a ladder during pregnancy’ and going to back-street abortionists.²

Margery was horrified by the conditions in which such families lived, including the physical state of their housing. Although the houses themselves — having been designed for business and professional families in the mid-nineteenth century — were solidly built with large rooms, the facilities had not been increased to cope with multiple occupation. Often, they had only one lavatory and a water supply up to the first floor but no higher, and were owned by landlords indifferent to the squalor. In notes she wrote later, Margery refers to these landlords as ‘well-to-do East-end Jewish tailors’; it is difficult to know now whether this is a statement of fact. Today we may well read it as anti-Semitic: probably neither Margery nor her audience noticed this. Food had to be cooked on open fires or a single gas ring, and slops were emptied from windows into back yards. Crucially, many women did not want more children, and were sometimes forced to resort to dangerous back-street abortions, something Margery’s own charwoman had undergone. In terms of their general health, most working-class women had no insurance to enable them to see a doctor without worrying about the cost.

Birth control, as contraception was known at the time, was generally a dirty word. In 1834, a book by Charles Knowlton entitled The Fruits of Philosophy, containing some basic though not always accurate information about it, was published in Britain, two years after its first appearance in the United States. It seems not to have made a great stir at the time but, some forty years later, it led to a Bristol bookseller being convicted of selling a book with obscene illustrations. Angry at what had happened, Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society,³ and his associate Annie Besant, set up the Freethought Publishing Company and brought out a new edition at a price that made it much more widely accessible. Bradlaugh and Besant were tried for breaching the Obscene Publications Act of 1857; although they were found guilty,

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² Wellcome Collection, SA/FPA/SR21.
³ National Secular Society, https://www.secularism.org.uk/
and Knowlton’s work was judged to be calculated to deprave public morals, it was accepted that their personal motives were not corrupt and they were able to get the judgement set aside on a technical point relating to the wording of the indictment. As so often happens with trials of this kind, Knowlton’s book received a huge boost in sales because of the extent of public interest in the trial.4

In the 1920s, when birth control clinics began to be set up, the very fact that contraception was almost a taboo subject was attractive to some of the middle-class women who became involved in the work. As Margery’s younger colleague and friend, Nancy Raphael, recalled in an interview in 1978: she enjoyed ‘the fun of the unmentionable’. But also, for her as for Margery, there was a ‘burning sense of the wrongness’ that for some women the natural expression of their love led, inevitably as it seemed, to poverty and ill health.5 Some of the most impassioned statements on behalf of women in poverty come from a book by Lella Secor Florence, an American married to a British academic, who was instrumental in founding a contraceptive clinic in Cambridge in 1925.6 Florence does not shy away from telling stories of the distress she encountered among parents who found themselves unable to support their large and increasing families. In the foreword, the physician and academic Humphry Rolleston writes that the book ‘throw[s] convincing light on the pitiful plight of the multiparous mothers of the poor and of their unwanted children’. Additionally, in the introduction, another academic, F. H. A. Marshall, explains that the origin of the Cambridge clinic was neither scientific nor political but the realisation that one of the greatest needs of working-class people was ‘some certain and simple way of regulating the size of their families and preventing the arrival of unwanted children’.7

However, the same book demonstrates the depth of opposition to the very idea of discussing the subject of contraception as well as the misogyny that ran through the debate (if indeed ‘debate’ is the appropriate word). As Rolleston writes:

5 Women’s Library, London School of Economics, 8SUF/B/177.
7 Ibid., pp. 4, 5.
Birth control is a difficult subject and arouses rather vigorous expressions of condemnation from those whose convictions must be respected as evidence of sincere anxiety as to its effect on public morals.\(^8\)

He also refers to a ‘not unnatural disinclination to discuss an unpleasant subject’: doctors themselves were far from immune to such an attitude. Church members, who were a far larger constituency than is the case today, were sometimes treated to highly-coloured rhetoric from their clergy. Florence quotes the bishop of Guildford:

‘It is impossible to adopt [contraceptive] practices without a coarsening of sensibility. I believe that any pure-minded girl, uncorrupted by sophistry, shrinks from these methods with an instinctive repugnance’.\(^9\)

When the Cambridge clinic opened, the Catholic bishop of Salford urged people to ‘smash’ it and bricks were accordingly thrown through its windows.\(^10\) Raphael remembered that Margery was one of those who handed out leaflets at the premises of the Cambridge clinic, in the face of Catholic opposition. It was probably in support of her sister-in-law, Petica, one of the founders and the assistant treasurer of this clinic, that Margery took such action.

Despite some recognition by government that maternal and child health was an essential part of public health policy,\(^11\) birth control did not figure as part of this. After the partial success in 1918 of the campaign for women’s suffrage, women were realising that they did not only want a say in the political life of the country, they also wanted to be able to control their own reproductive lives. The first contraceptive clinic in the world had been set up in Holland in 1881, the second by Margaret Sanger in the United States in 1916.\(^12\) It was in this environment that Marie Stopes founded her Society for Constructive Birth Control in 1918, opening her first clinic in Holloway, north London, in 1921.\(^13\)

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\(^8\) Ibid., p. 3.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 136.
\(^11\) A Maternity and Child Welfare Act was passed in 1918, which began to bring maternal and child welfare under the local authority umbrella.
\(^13\) It later moved to Tottenham Court Road.
Thanks to the fact that advice there was given by a midwife rather than a gynaecologist, this clinic attracted hostility from the medical profession, although, as a profession, doctors were hardly in the forefront of providing contraceptive services. In the same year, the Malthusian League,\(^\text{14}\) founded in 1877, opened the Walworth Women’s Welfare Centre, south of the Thames near the Elephant and Castle. Sessions took place on two afternoons a week, one providing infant welfare services and the other birth control advice. To this clinic too there was strong opposition: for example, volunteer helpers were apt to find themselves pelted with eggs. Both clinics were aimed primarily at women, although, at Walworth Road in 1922, the medical officer began to give lectures to both men and women on sexual hygiene and related subjects. A pressure group, the Society for the Provision of Birth Control Clinics, was set up in 1924 and took over the Walworth Road clinic.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) The Malthusian League saw birth control as a socio-economic question rather than an individual one; its purpose was the reduction of poverty: Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day: Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 86–87.

North Kensington had one of the worst infant mortality rates in London, with many malnourished babies and children dying of bronchopneumonia, gastroenteritis or infectious diseases in particular. In a 1932 enquiry into infant deaths, the North Kensington rate was found to be twice as high as that of South Kensington, with deaths from infectious diseases ten times the number. Since 1911, there had been a baby clinic in the area, founded in memory of Margaret MacDonald (wife of Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald) and of Mary Middleton (wife of Ramsay MacDonald’s Assistant Secretary); some doctors also ran infant welfare centres. But what Margery and the colleagues she gathered round her realised was that contraception was a crucial missing piece in the jigsaw of maternal and child health and welfare. It would be easy to regard her as a middle-class do-gooder, as indeed she was: but from the beginning, Margery was both an exceptionally hard worker and an excellent manager, and she also empathised, without being patronising, with all sorts and conditions of women.

In 1924, it seemed (in Margery’s own words) ‘clear & easy what we [Margery, Margaret Lloyd and their friend Margaret Dighton Pollock] had to do’—start a contraceptive clinic. They set about roping in other supporters, persuaded four people to guarantee £25 each, and found premises at 12 Telford Road, which had been a child welfare clinic and was therefore reasonably equipped. Since the local Health Authority was vacating it, they were able to rent it for £50 per annum. Margery cajoled some of her friends to form a committee, among them the writer Naomi Mitchison and Naomi’s barrister husband Dick, and her sister-in-law Ethel Sprigge (née Jones), whose husband was a doctor and editor of The Lancet. The only paid member of staff in the new clinic was the doctor. Its first year’s funding had to come entirely from voluntary contributions because the Minister of Health in Ramsay Macdonald’s

16 Marks, Metropolitan Maternity, p. 97.
17 Wellcome Collection, SA/FPA/SR21.
18 The building no longer stands.
19 Naomi had read Stopes’ Married Love and found it a revelation: Evans, Freedom to Choose, p. 84.
20 Later a Labour MP, and from 1964 a peer.
21 Dr Samuel Squire Sprigge: Margery rather unkindly recorded that she found him physically unprepossessing, though she liked him, and thought him clever and amusing.
22 Ramsay Macdonald was insistent that contraception was not a political matter. Women in the Labour Party voted several times for birth control advice to be
government, John Wheatley (a devout Catholic), had sent out a circular forbidding municipal health officers to give contraceptive advice. In 1926, Lord Buckmaster (father of Margaret Dighton Pollock) attempted to get a resolution through the Lords allowing local authorities to spend money on giving advice to married women, but it had been defeated. In the same year, Kensington became the first council in London (and second in the UK) to campaign, at first with a complete lack of success, for a change in the law to allow contraception to be provided through local authority-run infant welfare centres. Even in 1931, after such spending was allowed, the Ministry of Health permitted advice to be given only in cases where the mother’s health would be endangered by further child-bearing.23

In the early years, therefore, there was a huge dependence on volunteer work as well as voluntary financial support: ‘The three Margarets24 were the interviewers, dispensers & bottlewashers’,25 Margery recalled. They were not squeamish. Interviewing, for example, might mean going to see women in their own homes:

Sometimes […] when I have been foolish enough to visit a Clinic patient at mid-day, the stench which greeted me on the opening of the front door was something never to be forgotten; 8 or 10 ‘dinners’ being cooked in the house at the same time, — and most of them on an open fire in an old-fashioned grate, or on one gas-ring.

Not surprisingly, Margery and Margaret Lloyd took a justified pride in what their hard work achieved: in 1964, at a speech to celebrate forty years of the clinic, Margery said:

Forty years ago in this building, a puny infant was adopted by two enthusiastic young foster-mothers, whom you see before you. At that time

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24 Spring Rice, Lloyd and Dighton Pollock.

25 Wellcome Collection, SA/FPA/SR21.
the baby, whom we called ‘Birth Control’, had only two relatives, — a slightly seedy, but courageous one in Walworth, and a flamboyant one off the Tottenham Court Road, called Marie Stopes.\textsuperscript{26}

From the start, Margery’s vision for the clinic encompassed a much broader field than simply contraception. Services offered included help with minor gynaecological problems, children’s ailments, marriage guidance and advice on infertility. Freda Parker, a trained social worker who was appointed in 1953/4 to the post of ‘outside organiser’ (liaising with patients and raising awareness in the community), was interviewed in the 1980s for a television programme and said:

‘Because Margery Spring Rice, who was one of the amazingly good pioneers, realised that you — it’s not enough just to give a woman birth control and send her away. There’s a whole gamut of relationships and problems connected with that. So she wanted to set up a centre where, not only birth control, but sub-fertility and help with er, sexual problems in marriage and pre-marital advice and so on could be given’.\textsuperscript{27}

In an article written sixteen years after the founding of the clinic, Margery wrote that its function ‘had been originally to give scientific birth control advice to poor women who were unable to pay the fees asked by the very few doctors who at that time knew anything about this branch of medicine. We found to our dismay that well over 50 per cent. of our patients, coming only for contraceptive advice, needed treatment for post-natal conditions of some sort or another’.\textsuperscript{28} These were poor women, whose poverty was partly due to their large families, and they tended to be ignorant about their own and their children’s health. As time went on, it was hoped that facilities such as rooms for recreational activities, playrooms and a café might be provided.

The first task of the clinic was of course to get women to come. One crucially helpful factor at North Kensington was that the doctor (from 1927, Dr Helena Wright)\textsuperscript{29} was a woman and, therefore, more able to put at ease patients to whom speaking about intimate issues of health

\textsuperscript{26} Wellcome Collection, SA/FPA/SR7.
\textsuperscript{27} Wellcome Collection, GC/105/30.
\textsuperscript{28} Margery Spring Rice, ‘The Health of Working Women’, \textit{Eugenics Review}, 32 (1940), 50–54 (at 51).
\textsuperscript{29} Helena Wright was chief medical officer at North Kensington for some 30 years. She pioneered sex therapy. At the beginning of her North Kensington work, she was paid £2 per week: luckily, she had private means as well as a private practice.
and sex did not come naturally. It was not a simple task for clinics to address their reluctance and their natural desire to protect their privacy. Patients either heard about the clinic through word of mouth, or were referred by doctors, but, in either case, it took a considerable amount of courage for a woman to bring herself to set foot inside the door of a place that was still far from being considered respectable. Some women also faced objections from husbands who felt that contraception was their responsibility and some women came without their husbands’ knowledge. A survey of attitudes to sex and marriage between 1918 and 1963 found that couples tended to have a very gendered view of marriage, in which, particularly for working-class couples, contraception was seen as falling within the husband’s sphere. Both men and women might also see withdrawal or abstinence as more ‘natural’ than other methods. Kate Fisher describes a ‘fluent and contingent’ approach to contraception, which emerged in the context of couples’ reluctance to openly discuss sex. In her survey, she found numerous examples of women ‘who presented themselves as having been almost entirely dependent on their husbands for birth control information’ because sexual innocence was an essential part of their identity.31

Freda Parker was scathing about the attitude of some husbands who thought giving contraceptive advice to their wives might encourage them to have affairs: ‘As if a woman with four kids in a damp basement under four is gonna have it off with the milkman’.32 Occasionally, husbands themselves might come to the clinic, but it was perhaps even harder for them, in the context of the time, than for their wives to step inside that world of women. Sensitivity and confidentiality were essential to the clinic’s work; the importance of cups of tea is also not to be underestimated in making the place welcoming.

Perhaps the boldness required for a woman to step over the threshold, and the barriers to its success, are illustrated by the account of one untypical patient: Pauline Crabbe, who herself later worked for the Brook Advisory Centres, was interviewed for a television programme in the 1980s. Although it was some distance from her home, she had been a patient at North Kensington in the 1930s in anticipation of her marriage,

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31 Ibid., pp. 8, 60, 66–67.
32 Wellcome Collection, GC/105/30.
having been told about it by a more worldly friend. The worst part, she recounted, was that it was near a bus terminal, so that you had to ‘walk past a group of busmen who were waiting for the next um, tour of duty as it were’.

Once inside, she found some of the staff quite brusque and was acutely embarrassed by the whole procedure. She said that she had not learnt to use the cap properly, as a result of which her first child was born nine months after her marriage. In her view, from the perspective of the 1980s, it was hard for the clinic to attract the women who needed it most: if you have a whole range of problems, she thought, birth control may not come at the top of the list, and the middle-class women who ran the clinic did not always recognise that.

Freda Parker echoed this: the volunteers who interviewed patients were usually ‘dominant’ women, who were apt to forget what a traumatic experience it could be for the patient. If you are not ashamed of your own underwear, you may not recognise such shame in another. Interviews needed to be conducted ‘tenderly’: ‘it wasn’t in a way a lack of care, it was a lack of understanding, and training, cos one didn’t train voluntary workers’.

Helena Wright, a determined and single-minded woman who had decided to pursue a career in contraception, visited Stopes’s clinic and then North Kensington, where Margery recognised her potential. When a vacancy arose, Margery offered Wright the job on the basis that she would be free to make any changes she saw fit. The partnership was to be an enduring and fruitful one, though not always easy: Margery’s daughter described it as a love-hate relationship, commenting that the two women must have been the two ‘least diplomatic women in history’.

Margery’s own role was multi-faceted. She worked hands-on in the clinic, alongside patients, who were encouraged to help with its running; for thirty-four years she chaired its committee; and she raised funds. In 1968, when a BBC programme about the clinic was planned, a friend commented that when something was proposed but there was no money, Margery’s reaction would always be ‘We’ll get it’.

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33 Wellcome Collection, GC/105/43.
34 Wellcome Collection, GC/105/30.
35 Evans, Freedom to Choose, p. 135.
36 This programme appears to have never been broadcast (the BBC Genome search engine does not find any evidence of the programme).
did everything she could to raise the profile of the clinic, particularly among influential members of society. In 1928, she was the moving force behind a dinner party that was held at the house of a distinguished doctor, Arthur Ellis, at which the guest of honour was Lady Denman, Liberal, suffragist and president of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes. Several academics, including Winifred Cullis, were present, as was the secretary of the Birth Control Investigation Committee (1927), Marjorie Farrer, who was to become a personal friend of Margery’s as well as a fellow-campaigner.

The outcome of this gathering at the Ellises was the formation of the National Birth Control Council in 1930, with Lady Denman as chair (which became the National Birth Control Association the following year, and the Family Planning Association in 1939). On the executive committee of this body, which co-ordinated five existing bodies, were Margery, Eva Hubback, Mary Stocks, Marie Stopes and Helena Wright. The secretary was Margaret Pyke, a woman of ‘single-mindedness, integrity and good humour’, another who formed a friendship for life with Margery.

Nancy Raphael, who began volunteering at the Islington clinic in 1935, the year after its foundation, described Margaret Pyke as a good-looking, intelligent woman who was good with money and had an attractive

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37 Arthur William Mickle Ellis was a Canadian doctor who had settled in London at the end of the war.
38 Cullis was the first woman professor in a university medical school. She believed that biology teaching ‘should not end at the waist’: R. E. M. Bowden, ‘Cullis, Winifred Clara’, in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32661
41 Suffragist, writer and social campaigner.
42 Wright had persuaded Margery that Stopes should be on the committee, but co-operation did not come naturally to Stopes, and she resigned in 1933: Evans, Freedom to Choose, pp. 143–44. Rowbotham describes how, when Stopes declared ‘I’m not the Cabin Boy in this movement. I’m the Admiral’ ‘The other women listened politely and carried on regardless’: Rowbotham, Dreamers of a New Day, p. 98.
43 Leathard, The Fight for Family Planning, p. 46.
44 One of the ‘daughter’ clinics of North Kensington, run, according to Raphael, by idealistic but totally impractical ‘Bloomsberries’, all talk and no action.
Pyke and Denman made an excellent team and happily shared a house later in life, both having been in unhappy marriages. Pyke was perhaps not one of those to enjoy the thrill of the shocking: she was always anxious to defend the good name of the movement, both with the public and with the medical profession, although she was later involved with the Brook Advisory Centres, founded specifically to give contraceptive advice to young unmarried people in 1964. According to Raphael, her single-minded commitment to the mission of the clinics helped to build loyalty across the movement; on the other hand, her love of power led her to surround herself with people unlikely to challenge her and, as she got older, the size of the undertaking began to be too much for her. There were times when Margery did challenge Pyke’s authority but, according to Raphael, she always lost, being an excellent organiser but a less adroit politician than Pyke.

The North Kensington clinic made an enormous difference to many lives, but its success with patients was patchy. Margery was not the only one to feel that not nearly enough follow-up was carried out, since patients often came once or twice and then dropped out. While this could have been because they had been happily supplied with contraceptives, it could also mean that they had given up on a method, such as the cap. Helena Wright laid great emphasis on the cap as helping a woman to get to know her own body, but it was not an easy device to use. In 1931, the clinic carried out a survey involving personal visits to 780 patients who had ceased to attend (one of the first systematic attempts to follow up drop-outs), and widespread dislike of the methods on offer as well as their unreliability were reported. It was recognised that there was a great need to find simpler as well as more reliable forms of contraceptive.

However, although the success of the clinic may have been intermittent in terms of its influence on the lives of individual women, if looked at in the larger context of social history and women’s rights, the importance of North Kensington and the other pioneering clinics can hardly be overstated. In the long term, they changed the picture entirely.

While Margery was devoting her considerable skills to the work at North Kensington, her marriage continued to deteriorate. In 1924, she embarked on a brief affair with a man called Herbert Reade but brought it to an end because, she said later, she began to despise

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45 Women’s Library, LSE, 8SUF/B/177.
herself for it and hated the secrecy. Much more significant was her affair with Dick Mitchison, a supporter of the North Kensington clinic, which began in 1926. Margery and Dick’s wife, Naomi (known as Nou), had probably met through their public activities. In one of her volumes of autobiography, *All Change Here*, Naomi recalls how she went to a meeting of the League of Nations Society, of which, at that time, Margery was secretary: ‘The then secretary, Margery Spring Rice, remembers me coming in with a silent duenna, perhaps my mother-in-law’s personal maid’. One of Nou’s biographers, Jenni Calder, says the two women met through the Women’s International League, which is possible, although there is no record of Margery being a member of that body. Dick and Dominick had overlapped at Eton, but Dominick was a few years older (Dick was about seven years younger than Margery). Whatever the exact circumstances of the first meeting between them, a close friendship grew between the families, founded not only on the personal affection between the women but on their shared interests: left-wing politics, feminism, internationalism, Irish politics and the birth control movement. Soon, the two couples were dining together at least once a week and taking shared holidays at Varengeville in Normandy. For a period, they and another family owned a cottage in Bledlow Ridge, Buckinghamshire, where, according to Naomi, Margery did most of the cooking. In 1928, Margery went on a sailing holiday in the Aegean with Dick, Nou, and other friends.

The Mitchison family had moved, in 1923, into a house in Rivercourt Road in Hammersmith while the Spring Rices were in Victoria Road, She may also have had an affair with Margaret Jones’s husband Kingsley Game, but this is likely to have been before 1919, the year in which she married Dominick and Margaret married Kingsley. Much later, she told her daughter that she had slept with five men in the course of her life.


This had its origins in the 1915 women’s peace conference in the Hague.


On one of these holidays, Margery introduced Benson and Nou to each other, and they became friends. One scholar believes that their friendship had a Lesbian element (Catherine Clay, *British Women Writers 1914–45: Professional Work and Friendship* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315261256), but her evidence does not necessarily bear this out.
Margery moved to St Peter’s Square, a few minutes away from Rivercourt Road. Arthur Ellis, who had been instrumental in publicising the work of the North Kensington clinic, and his wife Winnie, lived nearby on Chiswick Mall. When Margery’s brother, Douglas, was advising her around the break-up of her marriage, he referred despairingly to the bad influence on her of the ‘Chiswick milieu’. Dick and Naomi had agreed to have an open marriage: Dick had three significant affairs in the course of it and Nou had a long amitié amoureuse with the classical scholar H. T. Wade-Gery (‘Widg’). They were not unlike the Bloomsbury group in their passionate belief in the importance of friendship and of sexual freedom. It is unfortunate that we do not have Margery’s letters to Dick, but there are extant letters from him and Nou to Margery. As far as Nou is concerned, what comes through is the huge difficulty of living up to the ideal of not being jealous: she loved Margery deeply, and completely accepted the affair between her and Dick, but still struggled at some level, particularly as it is clear that she was not getting everything she wanted from Widg. In one undated letter, she writes that she would like to experience the kind of passion that Margery and Dick have for one another, which she has never had. When Dick’s affections shifted from Margery to Tish Rokeling, Nou and Margery shared confidences with each other about it. Margery felt that Nou was the one who held them all together.

Often Dick and Nou wrote to Margery by the same post, with their letters in a single envelope. Nou expresses enormous affection for Margery, though her struggles for equanimity do show through. In an undated letter addressed to ‘Margy, my own darling’, at a time when Dick and Margery were evidently together, she writes that necessary readjustments have to be made, which is ‘a little bit uncomfortable at the moment’. Unlike Dominick however — she wonders whether he is doing his readjusting ‘in the dark’ — she is ‘in the full light, and can examine the machinery and say how nice I think it is […] Kiss [Dick]

15 St Peter’s Square, bought by Margery soon after the separation, was partly tenanted to start with, but once she had the run of the house it became both an architectural project and a place where she was able to cultivate a gift for gathering round her all sorts and conditions of people. In the late 1920s, Robert Graves was also living in St Peter’s Square, in a flat he referred to as ‘Free Love Corner’: Virginia Nicholson, Among the Bohemians (New York: William Morrow, 2002).

With Margery, Tish Rokeling and Margaret Cole.
at once from me. It seems to make it all the realer that I should love you both so completely’. On 30 December 1926, from a holiday in Avignon, Dick writes that:

Nou sometimes doubts whether you and I are happier for loving one another, as things are. At least, I don’t think she really doubts — only intermittently. And anyhow, we are happier, aren’t we? I like writing your name. And I kiss your hair & throat, your cheeks & lips, my dear, dear love.

Dominick’s position in the relationship with the Mitchisons, like so much else about him, is hard to pin down. In the statement to the court that Margery made in 1929, when she was considering asking for custody of the children, she wrote ‘I do not think that either Dick or D[ominick] have ever had a closer friendship with anyone else than they had with each other’,54 but the extant letters do not quite bear this out. It is unclear whether he knew about the affair from the start, as Nou did, though

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54 Margery Spring Rice, Statement to the court, October 1929.
Margery alleges that Dominick encouraged it. In the undated letter to Margery already referred to, Nou writes that Dick has told Dominick ‘the essential fact, that he is completely in love with you’; she has given [Dominick] opportunities to talk, but he has not taken them. In another letter, she writes:

Dominick and I had a long walk yesterday and a short but very exciting one today — through the original slough of despond, I should think. I’ve never seen such completely muddy mud. D., I think, enjoyed it (subject always to every possible reservation!) and the week-end altogether. But he does make me muddled in my mind; sometimes I think I must be half-witted not to be able to understand him at all — for often I can’t — when he says he’s being perfectly normal. Is he really the normal, the natural and proper thing, and are we all quite unreal? Are we quite outside ordinary life? — or is he?"55

Over the course of the affair between Dick and Margery, however, and as the Spring Rice marriage went from bad to worse, the Mitchisons were definitely on Margery’s side. Nou thought that Margery was (naturally in the circumstances) blind to many of Dominick’s good qualities, but when they eventually separated, she wrote ‘I wish I was driving a steam roller and could run over Dominick’.56

The two families supported each other through various crises, children’s illnesses and Margery’s marital problems, but, in July 1927, the Mitchisons faced a terrible loss — that of their eldest son Geoff, who died after an operation on his mastoid. Nou was distraught: part of her distress was that she thought she bore some responsibility for Geoff’s death, a view openly and cruelly expressed to her by her brother, Jack Haldane.57 Their misery was compounded when, in the winter of 1927–1928, there were terrible floods, causing the Thames to break its banks. Two of the fifteen people drowned were servants of the Mitchisons. It was a time when Nou and Dick relied on Margery for both emotional and practical support. Nou, in her turn, supported Margery through the end of her affair with Dick. In another undated letter to Margery, probably written in spring 1928, Nou wrote:

All decent people make themselves bread for their friends to eat [...] At present you and Dick and I have none of us got much bread to spare.

55 Naomi Mitchison, letter to Margery Spring Rice, undated.
56 Naomi Mitchison, letter to Margery Spring Rice, undated.
And we want food desperately [...] Last summer Dick and I ate you — I particularly; after all, you probably saved my life [after Geoff’s death]. Since then, you’ve wanted feeding worse than any of us.

The end of the affair with Dick caused Margery great distress. She expressed her misery about losing him to Tish in a letter dated 17 October 1928, probably never intended to be sent as the envelope is marked ‘To be burnt unopened, if lost, — or in case of accident’, though such instructions are always ambivalent. She could easily have destroyed the letter herself. Dick and Margery remained friends but the two families were never so intimate again, partly because, under the terms of a judicial separation from Dominick, Margery was required by the court to promise not to bring the children into contact with the Mitchisons. Like all his ex-lovers, she used to receive a case of wine from Dick every Christmas, until near the ends of their lives (they were to die within a few weeks of one another).

Stella Benson remained in contact with both Margery and Dominick, though she was often away in China with her husband James (or Shaemas) Anderson. Although Benson had a clear-sighted view of the difficulties of being married to Dominick, she did not warm to Margery as she did to him. In October 1928, she wrote in her diary:

Margery lunched with me today and talked a great deal about her affaire. I am not spontaneously sympathetic with Margery because she is always so right [...] She also doesn’t view her own side with that touch of cynicism that makes for just observation of one’s own point of view. Nevertheless it would be unbearable, I admit, to have a fundamental liar, poseur and irresponsible like Dominick for a husband — still worse to have him as a domestic enemy as well — and as for his mother, she seems, by Margery’s account to be a poisonous old adder. But yet I feel sorry for Dominick, though he is by far the most in the wrong.58

Benson had come to understand well that that there was another side to the exuberance that she loved in Dominick. In 1929, she was writing ‘Dominick so seldom allows anyone else to show off’, and there are numerous comments on his drinking — Benson’s father was an alcoholic, so she knew something about what that meant for a person’s nearest and dearest. On one occasion, according to Benson, Dominick was ‘hopelessly fuddled and very tiresome — staring at one

58 CUL Add. MS 6762–6802.
with that dreadful blank unblinking smile’, and on another, he ‘was most disturbing — continually trying to light my nose, thinking I had an unlighted cigarette, & exclaiming & singing from time to time [...] It really is heartbreaking — so clever and so kind a person so imprisoned’. At one point, she thought he might have been ‘paying spies’ to inform him about Margery’s activities. In the summer of 1930, she went to Lords with him: ‘My withers were rung [...] by the fact that Dominick knew so many people at the match, & strove to buttonhole them while they all, painfully obviously tried to escape’. Benson recognized that while Dominick had ‘almost unlimited potential intellectual understanding’, his emotional intelligence was far behind. She was also irritated by the way he overplayed his Irishness.

However, at the same time, she was enthralled by his wit and the speed at which he lived life. Two extant letters from Dominick to Benson\(^\text{59}\) convey something of the qualities she loved in him and bear out her feeling that people had to run to keep up with his mental agility. The first letter, written in January 1926, ranges over politics, Ireland, China (where Benson was living at the time), culture, scandal,\(^\text{60}\) his work and family news. He describes a car journey they had taken: the car, known as ‘Hotenpot’ —

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\text{began to run backwards down hill so that even when Margie had checked her by steering into the bank she was only saved from turning turtle by a swift movement of my vast bulk to her outside edge. Every time I go in a motor car I dislike it more, but Margie is keener about, and better at, driving than ever. Nor has she been hailed to Bow Street again, so she appears to be learning cunning as well as caution.}\(^\text{61}\)
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As the state of her marriage deteriorated, Margery increasingly felt that things could no longer continue as they were, and eventually, she confided further details of the situation to her friends Arthur and Winnie Ellis. The Ellises already knew about Dick, and had been instrumental in persuading Dominick to sleep in a separate room from Margery. In

\(^{59}\) Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Add. MS 8367, ff. 308 and 346 [Dominick Spring Rice’s letters to Stella Benson].

\(^{60}\) Jack Haldane came close to being dismissed from his post at Cambridge University when he was cited as co-respondent in a divorce case.

\(^{61}\) Margery had evidently had a brush with the authorities: later in her life, she was notorious among friends and family for her cavalier attitude behind the wheel.
August 1927, just before Dominick left for an extended visit to America, he and Margery went together to see the Ellises and Margery stated in front of them that she could no longer live with him. However, when he came home earlier than expected, in November, she felt that she needed legal advice and turned to her brother, Douglas. Since Douglas kept diaries over this period, the turbulent relationship (and its culmination in an application to the courts for a judicial separation) can be seen from a different perspective.

As the oldest of the five Garrett children, Douglas provided a wise and steady foil to Margery’s more adventurous nature. There was clearly great affection between them even though he strongly disapproved of what he regarded as her irresponsible behaviour and she was sometimes deeply irritated by his conventionality. With regard to her marriage, however, she recognised that he was invaluable, and he was generous with help and advice. After Dominick’s return from the US, he records:

there were interviews with both of them, I trying to hold the balance & get them to put a face on it & continue keeping house together. But I fear this attempt has now broken down.

He referred each of them to a solicitor: ‘I am satisfied they could not be better looked after, & hope that I shall now be left out of it more or less’. Predictably, it was less rather than more. In June 1929, he wrote:

Marjorie & Dominick’s affairs culminated in a separation deed executed in (I think) July 1928. This was followed by an arbitration last autumn, principally on the question whether D. was entitled to deduct income from the allowance paid by him under the deed from July till the end of Sept., when 55 Victoria Rd was given up, and on other minor matters. The award was in M.’s favour, with costs. They still squabble over every conceivable thing, whenever there is an opening for doing so. M. has taken 15 St Peter’s Square, Hammersmith. At present she only has possession of half the house, & until she gets her tenant out next March the house will not be in the least suitable for her requirements. She still seems as thick as ever with the Mitchisons, to my regret; and is still very restless and emotional. The whole thing is a miserable business, and from the end of 1927 till the deed was signed (and, to a less extent, since then also) I had a very worrying time of it between the two of them, as

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62 Bizarrely, on the passenger list his country of future permanent residence is given as Ecuador: a mistake? Or Dominick’s joke?
I have tried to keep on reasonably good terms with D., though of course supporting her generally.

Another friend who was supportive — but at a distance, because she was mostly abroad in China and elsewhere at the time — was Eileen Power, who wrote in a letter to Margery on 22 October 1927:

I really am extremely distressed over what you told me yesterday: not at your separating from Dominick, but at your having had such a bad time for so long. You were so loyal in not speaking of your married life, & I (as you know) never ask questions, that I had thought you happy until the last year. I then thought that you were four friends trying to carry on on a new basis (owing to your being in love with Dick), and that you were bound to break at the weakest link, which was Dominick, who I did not think a large enough person to manage it: but last summer I thought he seemed to be behaving well about it, though I did not think he would be able to keep it up. I had no idea that you had been unhappy with him for so long (I had persuaded myself that I was quite wrong in not having wanted you to marry him), & I wish I had known in the summer, because I should have tried to see more of you, just to show you how devoted I am to you & I should certainly have come on the yacht! I cannot bear to think of your having had such a miserable time & having been forced through the sort of scenes which I know you detest. You deserve to be happy all the time without stopping & it is a shame.

The deed of separation was signed in May 1928. Dominick agreed not to drink alcohol other than beer or cider, though this was not a promise he was capable of keeping. Their two children, Stephen and Cecil, who were sent to boarding school in the autumn of that year, were made wards of court and were to see him one day a week at his mother’s house and to spend half of the school holidays with each parent. Margery moved out of Victoria Road to St Peter’s Square, and Dominick moved to De Vere Gardens (the next road parallel to and east of Victoria Road). In the statement Margery made the following year, she wrote that she thought the matter of the separation ‘could be made not to seem a very important one to [the children]’ — when Cecil, as an adult, read this extraordinary pronouncement, she simply added two exclamation marks with her initials in the margin. Margery also asserted that Dominick had become a Catholic, in spite of his previous scorn for all

63 As members of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy, Dominick’s father’s family was nominally at least Church of Ireland; his mother’s family, the Fitzgeraldds, had been
forms of religion; it is unlikely that he ever took this step, but he was certainly attracted by the drama of the mass. Stella Benson recalls going to the Russian Easter service with him, where he ‘wallowed in excessive worship’ leading her to wonder whether ‘drunkenness has any direct connection with religious fervour’. They also attended high mass at Westminster Cathedral together where he, again:

positively wallowed in devotion, almost washed himself all over in the font full of holy water. All showy offy, poor darling, the kind of showing off that strikes inward for he really feels a great excitement in his theatricality.64

Stephen also, in a letter to Margery from his preparatory school, mentions being taken to Westminster Cathedral by Dominick; and the head of Cecil’s preparatory school reported that Dominick objected to Wycombe Abbey School as a possible destination for Cecil on account of its Protestant atmosphere.

The separation by no means ended the troubles between Margery and Dominick. In 1931, Douglas wrote in his diary:

Marjorie’s affairs are still unsatisfactory. Dominick has, to all appearances, left the City & is believed to have been sacked from his post as manager of Grace Brothers (whether for drink or not, nobody knows certainly). He has announced, through Withers (his solicitor) that he is now earning nothing, & accordingly the prospect for M. is that after April next he will pay her nothing under the deed. How the education of his children is to be provided for after that I don’t know.65

In due course they both won scholarships, Stephen to Eton and Cecil to Wycombe Abbey, so that worry was greatly reduced: both schools were extremely generous in their financial provision.66 According to the statement to the court, Margery had made a will on her marriage leaving everything to Dominick — something that would not have been unusual at the time — but it had become apparent that he was obstructive

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64 CUL Add. MS 6762–6802.
66 Cecil was awarded a scholarship of £150 p.a.
about everything to do with money; since he was unable or unwilling to contribute anything to Charles and Ronald’s maintenance, Margery was worrying about how she would continue to pay fees for Ronald at Rugby and future university costs. In February 1930, Dominick wrote to Stella Benson ‘meanwhile it’s hard to educate children & oneself[,] pay taxes & pay £860 a year to Margery’.

In the circumstances, it must have been extremely distressing for her to receive two highly critical letters from Aunt Theo early in 1931. It is unclear whether Theo was referring to something specific, or to Margery’s lifestyle in general, or whether the outcome caused a breach between them. Nonetheless, they were corresponding about Clara in a friendly way the following year, and in later years they were close.

Margery had sent Aunt Theo a calendar, and, in a letter to Margery, Theo wrote:

But, dear child, I cannot hang it up on the wall — the very sight of it makes me almost too sad for tears when I think of the tears & sorrows your mistakes & mistaken opinions on Life & Conduct have made for yourself — your children & your mother[,] brother & me as one of the least of these. So I tore it up — & wished with all my heart that your life had been built on opinions like your father's — it wd then have been happier & more useful.

Theo admitted that her generation had landed the world in ‘the most revolting war in history’ but saw ‘purity & duty’ as essentials for the future — the word ‘purity’ crops up again and again. With her own deep Christian faith, she felt that she had not done her duty as Margery’s godmother. A second letter, dated 10 April, continues in the same vein:

My poor God-daughter — who has lost her way & cannot see that she has taken a wrong turning — Dear Child, of course I have loved you dearly for yourself’s sake & also for your very dear Father’s sake — and also for your mother’s.

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67 Dominick Spring Rice, letter to Stella Benson & Shaemus Anderson, 16 February 1930.
68 There is an implication in a letter from Gil Jones to her sister Hilda in 1919, at the time of Margery’s second marriage, that Aunt Theo had also been very critical of Margery over Isabel’s death.
69 Dorothea Gibb, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 6 January 1931.
She accused Margery of betraying ‘all the great causes of Liberty & Peace that you uphold with one hand and tear down with the other [...] You have cut yourself off from me & my house’. Such statements must have heaped coals on the burning pain that Margery was already enduring.

From 1924 onwards, Margery had been spending a huge amount of time on the North Kensington clinic. In the midst of all her personal difficulties, she threw herself with even more vigour into her public activities while the children were either at school, at home in the care of the nanny, at Aldeburgh with Clara, or spending their allotted periods with Dominick. In the early months of 1930, she travelled to the United States on a lecture tour, on which Dominick’s comment to Stella Benson was: ‘I don’t know why but I suppose to spout Free Love & Birth Control & find a rich man’. Margery’s work at North Kensington had put her in touch with Margaret Sanger, American birth control campaigner, and the main purpose of her tour was to meet Sanger and other pioneers in the field and to give a lecture entitled ‘English Women in Private and Public Life’. The press comments printed in the flyer for her Seattle appearance refer to her ‘charm and graciousness’, her philanthropy and her ‘fluent discourse’. Contraception was a hugely controversial subject in the US — as Margery recalled many years later, there were states in which, she was told, she must not even mention it. The trip was not all work: she enjoyed herself too, spending time in New York and Boston, as well as in California, where she went with Sanger to a tea party hosted by the socialite, socialist and philanthropist Kate Crane Gartz, and also took particular delight in meeting Charlie Chaplin. Both at Gartz’s tea-party and at the Los Angeles breakfast club, at which she was a guest, she found that her English sense of humour was at odds with that of her hosts. On 2 March 1930, while she was away, Ronald, aged fourteen, wrote to her:

70 Dominick Spring Rice, letter to Stella Benson & Shaemus Anderson, 16 February 1930.

71 Sanger was the founder in 1921 of the American Birth Control League, which became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She was later much criticised for her views on eugenics.

72 Another guest was Prince Friedrich Leopold of Prussia. Margery was described by the Los Angeles Times (26 February 1930) as ‘Lady Margaret Spring-Rice, famous English feminist leader’ (p. 14).
You seem to be quite far-famed in America already! I now have a mother visited daily by reporters, photographers, etc. Why on earth are they so keen on you, and how did they get to know about you so quickly?

At home again, she somehow found the emotional and practical resources to support friends in their marital difficulties — the artist Paul Maze and his wife Margaret73 (a cousin of Naomi Mitchison’s) and David and Ena Mitrany. David Mitrany, an academic economist, was teaching at Harvard in the early 1930s, while his wife Ena, who had suffered some kind of mental breakdown, was being treated in a residential setting by the psychiatrist, Eric Strauss. Margery acted as intermediary between the couple and Strauss, as well as going to visit Ena. Despite the agonies of her marriage, the late 1920s and early 1930s were not entirely unhappy years for Margery, not only because of the two years of joy Dick gave her. She had a great gift for friendship, which blossomed particularly among the many Germans and Austrians she became friends with at this time, offering practical and emotional help in the shadow of the rise of Fascism. In the second half of her life, Margery’s capacity to gather communities of friends around her was to be one of her defining characteristics.

73 The Mazes were to divorce in 1949.