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## **Abortion**

Abortion, achieved, or at least contemplated, forms a significant motif in twentieth-century British women's writing. Pioneering fictional depictions appeared in Jean RHYS's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and Rosamund LEHMANN's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936). Novels, memoirs and biographies reveal common patterns: ineffective gin and hot baths, followed by useless medication, the quest for a contact, the expensive Harley Street operator, the dangerous backstreet abortionist.

Abortion was a criminal act under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which did not recognize medical justifications: even so, a few doctors performed discreet operations, costing around £100. During the 1930s, women's organizations supported amending the law, and an Abortion Law Reform Association was formed. In 1938 a government committee was appointed to investigate the subject, while Aleck Bourne, a gynaecological surgeon, operated on a girl of 14 who had been gang raped, to test the law. This case figures in the background of Virginia WOOLF's *Between the Acts* (1941). His successful defence, that continuing the pregnancy seriously threatened her mental HEALTH, established important case law.

In 1967 an Abortion Act legalized abortion on physical or mental health grounds, under medical control, and taking into consideration social conditions. The anti-abortion lobby has so far failed to overturn this.

### ***Suggested Reading***

Brookes, Barbara. *Abortion in England, 1900–1967* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).  
Hindell, Keith and Madeleine Simms. *Abortion Law Reformed* (London: Peter Owen, 1971).

Lesley A. Hall

## **Ackland, Valentine 1906–1969**

Neglected poet, autobiographer, and long-term partner of novelist Sylvia Townsend WARNER. Born in London, Ackland began writing poetry in her adolescence. Like Townsend Warner, Ackland was deeply committed to the Communist Party, and later to left-wing politics. She produced a documentary on labourers' lives, *Country Conditions* (1936), and wrote for papers such as the *Daily Worker*. Ackland's poetry, the bulk of which was published posthumously in two collections, *The Nature of the Moment* (1973) and *Further Poems of Valentine Ackland* (1978), concerns itself mostly with themes of love, war, the spiritual, and the writing of poetry.