Breeding a Better Woman:  
The Eugenics Movement in Canada

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Abstract

The Eugenics movement in Canada begun in the 1920 and started to gain momentum with support from many prominent Canadian women of the time period. Much of the literature and education for new parents at the time focused on providing superior care for children that would purify the Canadian race. Much of the movement was intertwined with issues that mainly affected women.

The 1920s were a time of rapid change in Canada: Canada was experiencing the effects of a worldwide depression, the women’s movement was beginning to campaign for greater rights and the infant mortality rate was quite high. People were beginning to be worried about the state of morality in society. There were many reasons that Canadians wanted to see a reduction in the number of “feeble-minded” people in their country. This ultimately led to the eugenics movement in Canada, which tried to enhance the race of the country by eliminating the people they saw as less desirable from the gene pool. This was done in many ways including birth control and sterilization. Many of the issues that revolved around the eugenics movement were ways in which women were controlled as well. The rules and regulations that were applied did not only change the way the “feeble-minded” were able to reproduce, but women as well. The new emergent ideology of scientific motherhood was designed to help women of the superior race ensure their children did not die as infants, so that the “feeble-minded” population would not outgrow the “moral” population of Canada. Scientists controlled the ways, which women were to raise their children. The birth control movement was an aid, which prevented the “feeble-minded” from reproducing. The birth control movement also caused concerns that what they saw as the morally superior population of Canada would populate at a lower rate. Finally, sterilization was used to prevent the “feeble-minded” from overpopulating. This removed the ability to reproduce for many women, which was a removal of a woman’s rights. The eugenics movement in Canada was very much intertwined with women’s issues.

In order to understand the eugenics movement of Canada, it is first important to understand briefly the definition and history of eugenics. The term eugenics was first coined by the scientist Francis Galton in his 1883 book, Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development. He determined that the mental function and dysfunction of people was caused by nature and not by nurture. It was no surprise that Galton was interested in these theories as he was a cousin of the father of evolution Charles Darwin. Darwin was interested in the description of the events that
shaped living things, but Galton was more interested in how to harness this knowledge into the improvement of the human race. The theories of Gregor Mendel, who in the mid 1800s discovered that genes and genotypes were passed down from generation to generation, were not rediscovered until the turn of the twentieth century. Galton, without the benefit of Medelian genetics, had to therefore create charts of different citizens and put them into three categories: desirable, passable and undesirable. He tried to trace the characteristics of people he saw as deviant to see if this trend continued through generations. He wanted to start a database that would have the names of people he felt were unfit to breed. Galton also coined the terms positive and negative eugenics. Negative eugenics was used to describe policies that were aimed at restricting breeding of the "unfit," while positive eugenics was used to describe policies that encouraged breeding the "fit." Galton's theories were the basis for the eugenics movement in Canada. Canadians of the 1920s wanted to see a better bred society, something that Galton preached a few decades earlier.

When Galton first suggested his theories of eugenics he was against women having freedom over their own reproduction. This is why it is surprising that so many women and feminist women defended and advocated for eugenics. Galton said on the topic of birth control in his book Hereditary Genius "I protest against the abler races being encouraged to withdraw in this way from the struggle for existence." Galton feared that if women controlled their reproduction, the people whom he saw would improve the quality of the human race would not be able to populate the earth as fast as those who were "feeble-minded." Women who were participating in this movement were not necessarily familiar with Galton's theories, but even if they were they did not see all women as being equal nor did they want equal rights for all women.

There were several main players in the eugenics movement in Canada who were women. The most famous of the women participating in the movement was Helen MacMurchy. MacMurchy was a successful author as well as a doctor who wrote books on child welfare and care. The majority of her work was targeted towards battling the high infant mortality rates at the time she was writing. The Famous Five - Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney and Henrietta Edwards - were responsible for what is known today as the "Persons Case" in 1927, ensuring that women were defined as persons under Canadian legislation. All five of these women, at one time or another, spoke out in favor of eugenics for various reasons. These women will be more thoroughly discussed in the details of the eugenics movement.

3. Ibid., 16.
2 Ibid., 19.
At the turn of the twentieth century the death rate for infants was astronomically high, so there was much concern about how to ensure the superior race was being preserved. Eugenics was not only about getting rid of the inferior race (negative eugenics), but it was about ensuring that the superior race was able to continue to repopulate itself to make up the majority of the Canadian population (positive eugenics). In order to ensure that women of the superior race were breeding, doctors and scientists began to create theories of scientific motherhood. Women were being told how to raise their children in the best manner to ensure that their children would survive into adulthood. The method of raising a child was no longer up to the mother but rather the scientific community of Canada.

There was a lot of concern that as women began to take over men’s roles in industrial work during World War I, they lost their domestic and maternal instincts. Scientists wanted to bring women back to motherhood to ensure that the babies of desirable Canadian women were the ones that survived. In order for the Canadian public to be more understanding of the issue, MacMurchy herself said that mothers could be blamed for their children’s own deaths if they did not spend as much time nursing or tending to their baby as necessary. She stated that a woman’s main role should be in the household. This is a notion with which many women and feminists after her time would disagree. There was a large push for women to stay in the domestic sphere and in order to feel like good mothers many women felt morally and duty-bound to oblige.

Birth control was something that was very controversial when it came to eugenics. Even Helen McMurchy who was very supportive to the concept of keeping a superior race, had mixed opinions on this topic. Much of the push for birth control began during the Great Depression when many people were having trouble affording the large families that they had. They did not want to add on to this burden by adding any more children to their families. In order to combat this, many women were advocating for birth control thereby they could be in charge of their own reproduction. Birth control is no doubt a method of controlling one’s body, but when this choice becomes political it is no longer the woman controlling her own body, but the people in charge of the law.

It is commonly thought that A.R. Kaufman, the owner of a rubber company in Ontario, was the father of the birth control movement. This is not true man that started the birth control movement in Canada was A.H. Tyrer. Although it seems odd that men would be the ones who started this movement, it did give the movement more legitimacy than if a woman had started it. Tyrer was frustrated that he did not see a birth control movement in Canada. He thought family planning was very

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important and that Canadians should be embracing this new science. He got the advice of Mary Stopes, one of the major players in Britain’s birth control movement.7 Stopes said that he should become the propagandist for Canada’s birth control movement and with that advice he founded the Birth Control League in 1931.8

Money quickly became scarce for his movement so he was lucky enough to have A.R. Kaufman come to his rescue with much needed funding for his cause. Kaufman was not as concerned with preventing women from taking on the burden of raising more children than they could afford as with eugenics and population control.9 Since much of the funding coming into the campaign was now from Kaufman, Tyrer began to take on Kaufman’s ideals as well. They did not only preach for birth control to stop the “feeble-minded” population from reproducing, but they also called for sterilization as they felt that those who lacked character could not be relied on to use contraception on a regular basis.10 It is interesting that two men founded the birth control movement in Canada. It can be argued that these men were not keeping women’s best interests in mind, instead they were doing what they believed was best for the nation. The birth control movement in the opinion of these two men was not meant to liberate women, but to ensure that the nation was liberated from the burden of whom they saw as the “feeble-minded.” The start of the movement lacked a woman’s perspective clearly because no woman could have had the funding to support the effort in the early part of the century.

The opinion of Helen MacMurchy on birth control does differ from that of A.H. Tyrer and A.R. Kaufman. It cannot be clearly deduced whether this difference of opinion is because she is a woman and knew the stress the excess of children and lack of family planning could put on a family or if her opinion was based on her work trying to prevent infant mortality and maternal deaths. From her 1934 book Sterilization? Birth Control?: A Book for Family Welfare and Safety, she discusses different opinions on birth control at length. She gives many different opinions, not only her own, concerning birth control.

She discusses the points of view of four different groups of people that birth control effects. She starts off with mothers, saying, “she is who faces the risk and toil and pain of child-birth; who makes the chief sacrifices and bears the heaviest burdens of the rapidly expanding family. Therefore she should regulate the number and frequency of births.”11 This seems like a relatively liberal and logical approach to the subject. When it comes to the child she is also in favour of birth control, as she states that a child has the right to have the mother’s best care and if she has too many

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7 McLaren, The Bedroom and the State, 93.
8 Ibid., 95.
9 Ibid., 96.
10 Ibid., 97.
children she may not be able to give it the best care, in utero or after birth. When it comes to the father she stresses the importance of a woman's work at home. It would be impossible for the father to have all the attention necessary from his wife is she is caring for too many unwanted children.

Things get much less liberal when MacMurchy begins to talk about the implications that birth control have on the nation. She says that ratepayers and taxpayers would have a larger economic burden on their hands if birth control was distributed. This would cause an increased birth rate from unfit mothers as they would be the only ones still having babies. The nation would then have to provide funding for these babies. This agrees with the argument that in her book where she states "it is recognized that mental deficient's are incurable, that they are more fertile than normal people and that their children are nearly always mentally unsound". With this belief, it is no wonder she was concerned about the "feeble-minded" increasing their percentage of the population in Canada.

MacMurchy wanted women to have birth control, but her major concern was the degeneration of the superior race. Therefore, in her writings, she tried to emphasize that women should use birth control with extreme caution to ensure the nation was a pleasant place to live. MacMurchy's writings were very influential during the period she was writing; many people listened to her advice. Due to the fear that the nation's population would lose its morality, she may have made many women think twice before taking birth control. Eugenics was a movement that people supported because they feared the outcome of what an increased population of the "feeble-minded" would mean.

Eventually, the eugenics movement in Canada progressed to the point where a decision was made to take action against the reproduction of the "feeble-minded." In 1922 the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) as well as the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) actively lobbied to the government for the involuntary sterilization of the "feeble-minded." Emily Murphy and Nelly McClung became two of the largest advocates for this forced sterilization. In 1928 the Sexual Sterilization Act was passed by the UFA. The act allowed sterilization of residents of mental health institutions; consent was needed before anyone was to be sterilized. Inmates could only be released if the danger of the mentally unfit procreating was removed. A eugenics board of four members was created to ensure that only the people they judged as mentally unfit for procreation were being considered for the procedure. In the end 99% of people brought before the board were passed for sterilization, but only 60% were ever sterilized. In 1937 the bill was amended as it became very

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15 Ibid., 367.
difficult to obtain consent from the patient or a next of kin. The “feeble-minded” could then be sterilized without the consent of themselves or their kin. At this time the act was also amended to include more people that they would deem “unfit” enough for sterilization. By 1942 this included people that they saw as “incapable of intelligent parenthood” including those with syphilis, epilepsy and Huntington’s Chorea. In these cases consent was still required.  

When it came to the gender of the people sent to the board, fifty four percent were women and forty six percent were men. This is likely due to the fact that the mental institutions that were sending women to the board were largely comprised of females. Women that were presented to the board were much more likely to actually be sterilized in the end. Sixty-four percent of all women that were presented to the board were eventually sterilized compared to fifty four percent of men. It could be argued that the female social workers were much better at convincing women to accept sterilization in the cases in which consent was required.

The number of women who participated in the sterilization of their own gender is very interesting. Eugenics gave women such as Helen MacMurchy, Emily Murphy and Nelly McClung voices on the political stage that they may not have had otherwise. Although these women were arguing for the control of who was allowed to reproduce and therefore the women’s body, they were also improving their own status within society. These women were able to be politically relevant, something that Nelly McClung and Emily Murphy were struggling with in the Persons Case, trying to redefine the term “person” to be inclusive of all women. Reproductive rights were taken away from many women as well as men, so it was ironic that these women were trying to gain rights while simultaneously taking them away from Alberta’s women.

The eugenics movement in Canada was one that affected many social institutions. Many of the social institutions that were used to control the reproduction of the “feeble-minded” population ended up being influential in the lives of the women of the period. The methods that were used to control the “defective” population changed the way that women lived their lives. The new science of motherhood was able to control the ways in which women raised their children and to ensure the “superior race” was increasing their population. The birth control movement provided much needed relief to women suffering from economic hardships that would only be worsened by having more children. It provided a way that eugenicists could try to prevent unwanted births amongst the “feeble-minded” population, but also encouraged fear that this population would begin to expand at a more rapid rate than the “mentally fit” population. Finally, the eugenics movement

16 Ibid., 363.
17 Ibid., 372.
18 Ibid., 373.
19 Ibid. 360.
provided a voice for women to be a part of political space. The impact of the eugenics movement is not just something that disappeared when the Alberta Eugenics Board disbanded in 1972, \(^{20}\) instead its influence can be seen in our mothering books, our contraception and women’s role in the political scene.

**Works Cited**


