

[This paper was originally prepared for an event that was part of #UCLfacesRACE: Eugenics@UCL event, 18.00-21.00, 10th October 2014. It was subsequently revised and expanded in the understanding that this, and the other papers from the event, would be published in an online journal associated with UCL. As this has not happened, it seems to me reasonable to add to the other unpublished papers on my website. (May 2017)]

Eugenics and Gender

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Wellcome Library

Eugenics from its origin was strongly invested in a binary and essentialist view of gender and an unthinking reproduction of existing gender hierarchy, just as it rested on largely uninterrogated assumptions around whiteness and racial hierarchy, social class, national identity, and Imperial destiny. 'Fitness' for reproducing was predominantly positioned as a

male quality, a notion invoked in the 1930s poster exhorting the sowing of 'healthy seed'.

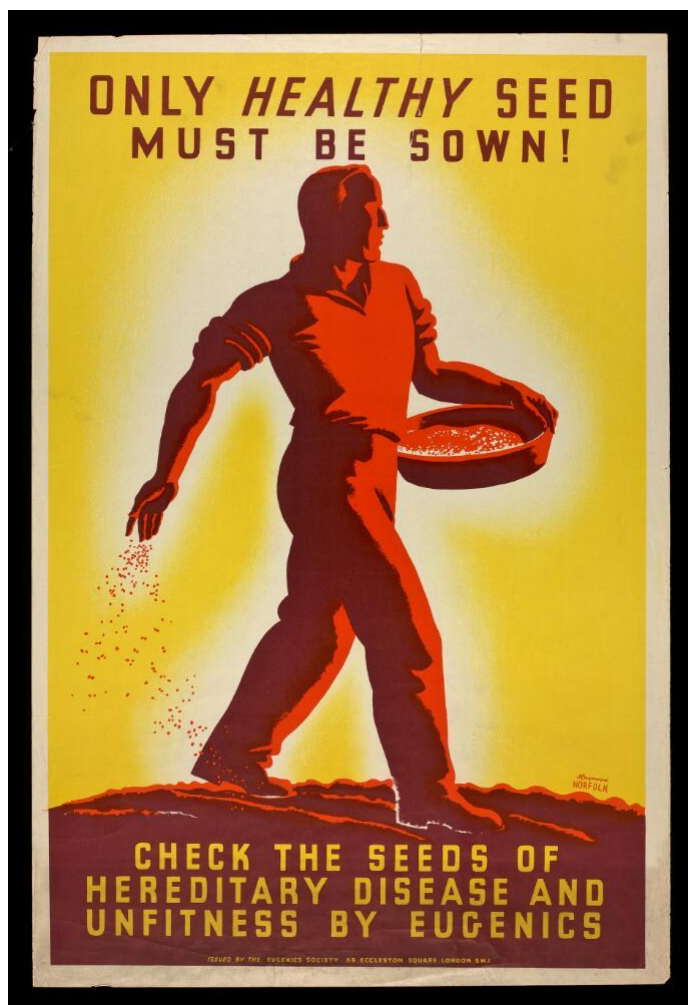


Figure 1 SA/EUG/G.49 Wellcome Library

Women figured largely as mere incubatory vessels for premium manly seed, with the desiderata being health and fertility. When Sir Francis Galton, who coined the term and the concept of eugenics in 1883, was contemplating the female contribution to the eugenic improvement of the nation, he considered that the specific qualities they could offer were fertility, the ability to pass a careful physical examination, and, rather surprisingly, 'athletic proficiency' (this may be related to the contemporary case being made for physical exercise as beneficial for women's reproductive health): but otherwise it all sounds very much along the 'be good sweet maid and let who would be clever' lines associated with conventional

Victorian attitudes towards womanhood. The fit man, however, was defined as having ‘health, energy, manliness and courteous disposition’.

When pedigrees were compiled to illustrate the hereditary transmission of qualities the focus was, particularly when representing positive and desirable qualities, on patrilineal descent.

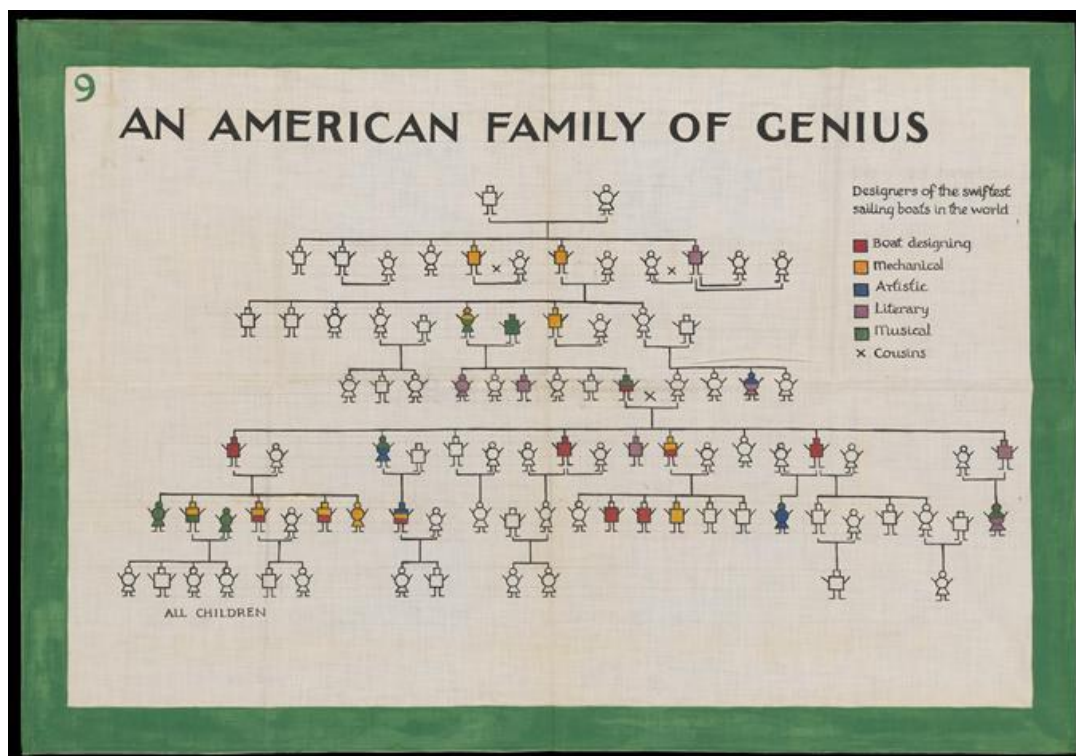


Figure 2 SA/EUG/G.33/8 Wellcome Library

As eugenic discourse developed, there was a persisting focus on women and complaints that they were either selfishly having too few babies (if they were fit for reproducing the nation) or fecklessly popping out too many (if they were unfit), or else wanting education and meaningful careers for themselves rather than passing on their qualities to their sons. Until well into the 1920s, the British eugenics movement was profoundly suspicious of birth control, believing that the fit middle classes were selfishly using it all too effectively, while it was assumed that the unfit lower classes were incapable of

the necessary forethought and discipline required to practice contraception as well as probably incompetent to do so.

However, a case can be made that there was a continuing subtext to eugenics in Britain which was expressing certain contemporary concerns around masculinity. As adumbrated by its originators, in particular Sir Francis Galton and his disciple Karl Pearson, both of them associated with UCL, it embodied a particular classed and racial form of masculinity. The cohort in question saw themselves as technocrats in the vanguard of evolution and at the forefront of progress. Their vision of eugenics, in spite of illustrations such as the sower of healthy seed, was less about physical capacity than intellectual qualities. It was very much focussed on a meritocratic ideal of the professionalised expert, whose claims to authority sprang not from aristocratic breeding (eugenic thought tended to emphasise the degeneracy and effete-ness of the upper classes), inherited wealth, or physical prowess but from intelligence, education, professional qualifications and expertise. This ‘aristocracy of the intellect’ felt that it ought to be having a greater say in the shaping of the nation than it did, placing a high premium on knowledge and ability combined with moral qualities, in particular self-discipline.

There were characteristic anxieties around masculinity for this particular group: Rob Boddice has made a convincing case for the instabilities generated within the discourse placing them at the pinnacle of evolution.¹ Men in professional occupations tended to marry late, because they could not contemplate setting up a matrimonial household appropriate to their status until they were securely established in their careers; this was productive of significant tensions around the management of their sexuality during this period. They were concerned about the transmission of their status to their offspring, and there were numerous arguments that the expense of educating sons to this end was one of the reasons why this cohort perceived as so desirable was having fewer children than it could. This was perhaps

one explanation why, although one might suppose that they considered themselves the sort of people who should be having more children, eminent figures in the eugenics movements tended to have small families or even none at all, seldom producing the desirable four children (well above replacement level) depicted in the image of the idealised eugenic family which appeared on much of the Eugenics Society's literature during the 1930s.

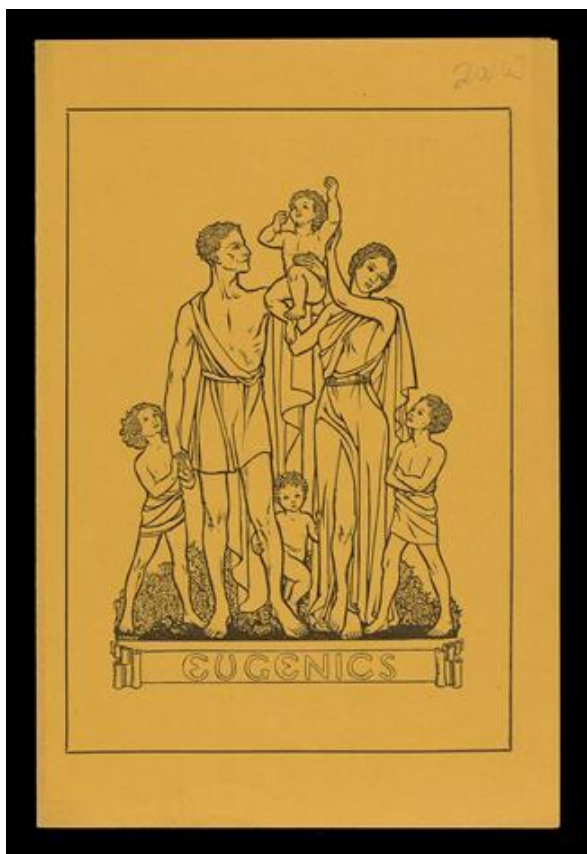


Figure 3 SA/EUG/J.17 Wellcome Library

Galton himself was childless, as was Leonard Darwin, his successor as President of the Eugenics Society, and few of the later proponents of eugenics had very large families. A rare exception was the statistician Sir Ronald Fisher, who, in spite of his significant visual defects and financial constraints, had eight children. In some instances this reproductive hesitation may have been also caused by personal concerns over fitness – several eugenicists, unlike Fisher, seem to have considered myopia a quality they should not be passing on, with one Fellow of the Royal Society turning down a solicitation to become a eugenic father by

artificial insemination on this ground. Some eugenists argued for measures such as tax concessions to alleviate the economic pressures towards family limitation. Others, such as Fisher, promoted the idea of family allowances to counter the social and economic advantages enjoyed by those with few children. This, however, gave rise to concerns that it would only encourage the unfit to have even more offspring.

The agenda of positive eugenics, i.e. that fit male meritocrats should be breeding more, never really took off. Those who in terms of class and achievements would probably have been considered exactly those who should be having offspring expressed lurking anxieties relating to cousin marriage or relatives with ailments presumed to be hereditary as well as possible acquired conditions: this is well-documented both in the archives of the Eugenics Society and in correspondence received by Marie Stopes.² It may also perhaps be inferred that when it came to positive eugenics, there was a pervasive ‘Imposter Syndrome’ afflicting the target population, extending beyond the economic considerations that continued for many men to trump feelings of eugenic duty.

This discourse of eugenics, while positing various improvements to the existing social system, did not make radical critiques of existing social arrangements. In the early twentieth century a number of advanced thinkers, most notably H. G. Wells, found eugenics in tune with their vision of progressive scientific development but applied it in more subversive ways, by extending it beyond the professional middle classes, and by suggesting that a really effective eugenics would transcend the monogamous paradigm assumed by Galton and Pearson, and legitimise ‘free love’ in the interests of better breeding. The fit male should spread his seed about: Wells’s theoretical position (if not his actual practice) on this incorporated the notion of state Maternal Endowment to liberate women from dysgenic dependence upon a single partner.³

So much for the masculinity issues interwoven into the eugenic project: what about women's responses? A proportion of the male anxieties expressed through the eugenics movement were to do with the general upheaval in gender relations taking place during the final decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, with the demand for women's rights in a range of areas and a swingeing critique of male-dominated institutions. An increasing (though still in absolute terms very small) number of women were achieving university educations and even entering the professions, thus entering into competition with men, though they were not necessarily being removed from all possibility of marriage and motherhood. However, they tended to marry later than usual and there were concerns that they were having smaller families.

Rather surprisingly, perhaps, Karl Pearson employed a significant number of mathematically-gifted women (and even married one as his second wife) in the Biometric Laboratory at UCL which had been established with funding from Galton to assist in its statistical work. The fact that they were cheaper than male equivalents was doubtless a not-inconsiderable factor, but Pearson was also extremely impressed by their ability, dedication and hard work, particularly their accurate performance of extensive amounts of gruellingly tedious calculations.

Given how few jobs, apart from school-teaching, were available to women with these talents and training, just having an opportunity to use them must have been a powerful attraction, but the women in question do appear to have been generally in sympathy with the programme of the Laboratory. Rosaleen Love has suggested an explanation for the apparent disjuncture between eugenic beliefs and life as single working women (indeed, in several instances, a clear commitment to the movement for women's suffrage), in a desire to prove women's competence for citizenship within the kind of new meritocratic order envisioned by Pearson.⁴ Like other women of the period active in good causes, such as the several women

concerned with matters to do with social welfare who joined the Eugenics Education Society on its inauguration, they may have drawn upon the contemporary concept of ‘social motherhood’: women who had sacrificed personal maternal fulfilment in the cause of bringing about reforms in the public sphere were envisaged as embodying a wider vision of the maternal, operating for the benefit of society as a whole.

A much more subversive use of eugenics emerged within the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s movement, whereby some women engaged in the struggle for women’s rights turned back upon the patriarchal system the idea of ‘good breeding’ as the basis of a healthy society. Eugenics provided a way of talking about issues of reproduction and sexuality which was impersonal and scientific and about wider issues of the social good and indeed about the important contributions women could make. It also resonated powerfully with the concerns already being articulated about the double moral standard and men’s responsibility for disseminating sexually-transmitted diseases to the harm not only of their own wives and children but society as a whole. Arguments were advanced (and formed the basis of plots in best-selling ‘New Woman’ novels) that in the existing state of society, girls were kept in ignorance, lacking the necessary tools to assess the fitness of potential spouses as husbands and fathers, while economic pressures and social convention could lead them into wedlock with men who were infected with loathsome diseases, and/or ‘hereditary degenerates’. Provided with the necessary knowledge, and in a position to choose freely, women would, it was proposed, select the best possible fathers for their future children. This view of course rested heavily on ideas about innate maternal instincts, but it was nonetheless strategically valuable, intersecting as it did with the belief that it was desirable that women should be the arbiters within marriage of when to have children.⁵

Women were, however, also resisting the notion that their duty to the race was entirely about reproduction, rather than using any capacities of their own for their own

benefit or the good of society. The vision of an ‘endless chain of fruitless lives all looking ever to some supreme future consummation which never materializes’ was condemned as a ‘perpetual sinking of woman’s personality in a mistaken interpretation of her duty to the race’.⁶ It may be surprising to hear that this statement of resistance to the pressures on educated middle-class white women to breed for Britain was penned by Marie Stopes, a graduate of UCL and later employed there as a lecturer in botany.

Stopes is best known for her role as birth control advocate. She was a fierce and articulate proponent of the view that women should themselves determine how many children they should have, and when. Like many of her contemporaries, she did indeed have some eugenic views (though it’s possible to over-generalise from her objections to a prospective daughter-in-law on the grounds of her ‘hereditary defect’ of myopia), but in common with the wider birth control movement, she held strong convictions about the benefits of well-spaced pregnancies to willing mothers and the importance of contraception to women’s self-development. The motto of her Mothers’ Clinic ‘Joyous and deliberate motherhood, a sure light in our racial darkness’ emphasised the national benefit to ‘the race’ of voluntary motherhood. However, like other contemporary birth control clinics, it operated as a service provider to its clients, both those wishing to prevent conception and those trying to find out why the babies weren’t coming, rather than as an organ of propaganda or judgemental social control. Work on birth control organisations and the trajectories of individual clinics strongly suggests that although this woman-dominated movement was prepared to form strategic alliances with the Eugenics Society, accept funding for contraceptive research, and deploy eugenic rhetoric in specific circumstances, it continued to maintain a cautious distance from any too-close association.

The intersection between eugenic ideas and gender in Britain was complex, and capable of being strategically deployed for diverse and indeed contradictory purposes.

However, it must be said, that this was within a broader context of still largely unexamined and uninterrogated assumptions about race, class, whiteness, Britishness, being an Imperial nation, and indeed what constituted fitness.

1 Rob Boddice, 'The Manly Mind? Revisiting the Victorian "Sex in Brain" Debate', *Gender and History*, 23.2 (2011), pp. 321–40, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2011.01641.x.

2 Lesley A. Hall, 'Marie Stopes and her correspondents: personalising population decline in an era of demographic change', in Robert A. Peel, (ed.) *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement: proceedings of a conference organised by the Galton Institute, London, 1996*, (London: The Galton Institute, 1997).

3 George Robb, 'The Way of All Flesh: Degeneration, Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol. 6, No. 4 (Apr., 1996), pp. 589-603 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4617222>.

4 Rosaleen Love, "'Alice in Eugenics-Land'": Feminism and Eugenics in the scientific careers of Alice Lee and Ethel Elderton', *Annals of Science*, Volume 36, Issue 2, 1979 , pp. 145-158, DOI: 10.1080/00033797900200451.

5 Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995); Angeliqne Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ann Taylor Allan, 'Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain, 1900-1940: A Comparative Study', *German Studies Review* Vol. 23, No. 3 (Oct., 2000), pp. 477-505 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1432830>; George Robb, 'Race Motherhood: Moral Eugenics vs Progressive Eugenics, 1880-1920', in Claudia Nelson and Ann Sumner Holmes (eds.), *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875-1925* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 58-74.

6 Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood : A Book for Those Who are Creating the Future* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), p. 159