INTRODUCTION

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Eugenics has had a variety of meanings since its introduction. The word itself means “nobility in birth.” Francis Galton, a British scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the term in 1883. Later, many reform-minded groups in Europe, Asia, and North America embraced eugenics as an ideology that offered a scientific way of sorting people into different groups and encouraging the reproduction of particular segments while restricting it in others. Most famously during the Second World War, Germany engaged in a large-scale eugenics program constructed around the idea of building a master Aryan race. Germany’s approach incorporated positive eugenics, meaning encouraging reproduction among the so-called most desirable segments of society, alongside negative eugenics, which involved the forced and often invasive methods of controlling fertility, usually by surgery, but also by segregation. India later targeted poor men with vasectomies as part of a public health program aimed at reducing the social burdens of poverty. The United States had formal eugenics policies in 32 states, that were officially responsible for surgically sterilizing over 65,000 people.

In Canada most provinces entertained the idea of eugenics. For some provinces, like Nova Scotia, the concept of eugenics promoted the segregation and confinement of women of child-bearing years who were considered likely to be irresponsible mothers. Ontario incorporated a mixture of segregation and sterilization, though never passed an official law on sterilization. Alberta and British Columbia took the idea one step further and in addition to placing women and men considered feeble-minded, or lacking in intelligence, in institutions, a board of experts then examined and authorized the surgical sterilization of these individuals before releasing them back into the community. Some of those people were not even informed that the operation made them infertile. The official eugenics programs in Alberta and British Columbia remained in effect until 1972 and 1973, respectively, and were responsible for the sterilization of nearly 3,000 individuals in Alberta and under 200 in British Columbia.

During the early phases of the eugenics movement, eugenicists often focused on the idea of feeble-mindedness as a key hereditary quality that needed to be removed from modern healthy communities. Feeble-mindedness was a general term, with no specific medical meaning but it incorporated elements of lowered intelligence; an unwillingness or inability to conform to local customs, standards, or laws; and a tendency to veer toward immoral and or criminal behaviour. Allegedly feeble-minded people also had large families, which supported the impression that feeble-mindedness was spreading like an epidemic that would soon overwhelm the numbers of so-called normal, intelligent members of society. This idea contributed to a growing fear that Canadians were headed down a path toward social degeneration. These kinds of observations led to a widespread belief that this subpopulation needed to be controlled to avoid the spiralling effects of poverty, crime, and vice.

Canadians also studied their poor and immigrant populations to gauge the ways in which these groups were infecting national goals for a strong and healthy society. Mental hygiene surveys took place across Canada in an effort to count the numbers of people in these categories and to better predict how large the problem might become without intervention. Angus McLaren’s article offers a more detailed description of how these ideas took root in British Columbia and how eugenics appealed even to progressive thinkers as a humane solution to a growing population problem. As McLaren explains, Western
Canadians pushed the idea furthest, and largely due to the efforts of early feminists who saw distinct advantageous in policing motherhood to improve families.

Religious voices across Canada also used eugenics as a way to offer explanations and justifications for charity, exclusion, segregation, and/or deportation aimed at people and groups who did not fit with their vision of Canadian society. In Quebec the Catholic Church played an especially important role in stimulating ideas about healthy families, which did not mean restricting fertility but instead focused on encouraging large families among French Catholic communities. Although the Church did not condone surgical sterilizations, we might ask whether it applied the notion of positive eugenics to encourage a higher birth rate.

By the end of the Second World War, several married and presumably healthy women began seeking sexual sterilization as a form of birth control. According to the Criminal Code of Canada from 1892, all forms of contraception, including sterilization, remained illegal and this law was not overturned until 1969. Women seeking sterilizations in the form of tubal ligations or hysterectomies, and later men volunteering for vasectomies, challenged the eugenics program in ways that had not been anticipated by politicians or physicians. As a result, sexual sterilization surgeries took two distinct paths after the Second World War. One path remained tied to eugenics programs that legally operated on institutionalized patients in Alberta and British Columbia. The other path involved women and, by the late 1960s, men who volunteered to be sterilized as a permanent, safe, and medically assisted way to control family size, albeit as an illegal operation. This idea is explored further in my article by looking at how women attempted to gain access to sterilization as a form of contraception, and how the Catholic church responded to this behaviour on the part of married women. Meanwhile, for women and men considered feeble-minded, of lower intelligence, or criminal, the operations were not only legal in Alberta and British Columbia, but also performed in many cases without their permission. The different understandings of reproductive rights often came down to a question of one’s presumed intelligence, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and moral habits. Fears surrounding the supposedly rapid reproduction among members of the so-called “unfit” segment of the Canadian population were expressed even in popular magazines.

As sterilization became intertwined with a more empowering image of second-wave feminism, human rights, and reproductive choice, some people diagnosed as mentally deficient continued to be sterilized without their knowledge. Eventually in the mid 1990s survivors of the Alberta sexual sterilization program, which ended in 1972, sued the provincial government. Leilani Muir was the first and only case that went to trial. Ultimately she succeeded in winning her case and the government was eventually forced to provide a financial settlement in compensation for causing her emotional, physical, and psychological damages.

Women like Leilani celebrated the right to be reproductive while other women revelled in the triumphs of overturning laws that now allowed them to control their reproduction. This paradoxical situation growing out of eugenics continues to stimulate heated debates over reproductive rights. We might question whether eugenic ideas are truly confined to a study of the past.

QUESTIONS

1. Did the eugenics programs target any groups and, if so, how might you detect this using the primary documents? Beyond groups defined as feeble-minded, can you identify any focus on gender, race, ethnicity, language, class, etc.?
2. How should we define eugenics?
3. What are some of the likely problems or challenges that might arise from doing IQ tests on Canadian families?

4. Is the medical profession to blame for eugenics in Canada? Why or why not?

5. Was Ralph Klein justified in suggesting that Albertans in the 1990s were not responsible for the policies of the past?

FURTHER READINGS


Living Archive for the History of Eugenics in Western Canada http://eugenicsarchive.ca/


