STRIVING FOR NATIONAL FITNESS

EUGENICS IN AUSTRALIA

1910s TO 1930s

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Abstract

Striving For National Fitness: Eugenics in Australia, 1910s to 1930s

Eugenics movements developed early this century in more than 20 countries, including Australia. However, for many years the vast literature on eugenics focused almost exclusively on the history of eugenics in Britain and America. While some aspects of eugenics in Australia are now being documented, the history of this movement largely remained to be written.

Australians experienced both fears and hopes at the time of Federation in 1901. Some feared that the white population was declining and degenerating but they also hoped to create a new utopian society which would outstrip the achievements, and avoid the poverty and industrial unrest, of Britain and America. Some responded to these mixed emotions by combining notions of efficiency and progress with eugenic ideas about maximising the growth of a white population and filling the 'empty spaces'. It was hoped that by taking these actions Australia would avoid 'racial suicide' or Asian invasion and would improve national fitness, thus avoiding 'racial decay' and starting to create a 'paradise of physical perfection'. This thesis considers the impact of eugenics in Australia by examining three related propositions:

• that from the 1910s to the 1930s, eugenic ideas in Australia were readily accepted because of concerns about the declining birth rate

• that, while mainly derivative, Australian eugenics had several distinctly Australian qualities

• that eugenics has a legacy in many disciplines, particularly family planning and public health

This examination of Australian eugenics is primarily from the perspective of the people, publications and organisations which contributed to this movement in the first half of this century. In addition to a consideration of their achievements, reference is also made to the influence which eugenic ideas had in such diverse fields as education, immigration, law, literature, politics, psychology and science.
Acknowledgement

I found valuable archival material in the Marie Stopes Papers at the British Library, the Eugenics Society Archives at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, the Galton Papers at the University College London, the Margaret Sanger Papers at the Library of Congress, and the American Eugenics Society Archives at the American Philosophical Society. I have also made use of material from British collections now available in Australia as a result of the National Library of Australia's Joint Copying Project which was undertaken in 1989. I am particularly indebted to the librarians who produced the four volume Bibliography of Australian Medicine and Health Services to 1950 and the NSW Parliamentary Library's extensive Newspaper Index 1910-1975. These sources listed relevant books, speeches, conference papers and newspaper items and, as well as revealing the presence of 'gems', indicated where they were located. Most of the material was available in either Sydney's Mitchell Library or in the Fisher Library at the University of Sydney.

I am indebted to Frances Lovejoy, who encouraged me to begin the thesis, and to my supervisors, Professor Roy MacLeod and Dr Judith Keene, who skilfully guided me to its conclusion. My employers, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, generously granted me studies assistance for six years.

As my thesis had its origins in research for Populate and Perish: Australian Women’s Fight For Birth Control, I wish to thank those people who helped with that book and who have continued to be helpful. I also appreciate the help I have received from Professor Mark Adams, Dr Wilfred T Agar, Dr Helen Bourke, Linda Brooks (Galton Institute), Dr Peter Cochrane, Edith Cox (National Council of Women), Dr Alan G Cumpston, Edwina Doe, Dr Lyndsay Farrall, Jane Foley, Dr Meredith Foley, the late Dr Frank Forster, Ashleigh Gallagher, Jeff Goldhar, Dr Lesley Hall (Wellcome Institute), Martha Harrison (American Philosophical Society), Jacquie Hart, Brenda Heagney, Professor Daniel Kevles, Dr John Laurent, Dr Milton Lewis, Dr Russell McDougall, Humphrey MacQueen, Dr Winifred Mitchell, Rosa Needham, Sue Phillips (Workers’ Educational Association), Ray Rhall (Repository Library, Fisher), Dr Stefania Siedlecky, Professor Michael Roe, Dorothy Simons, Petrina Slayton, Professor Barry Smith, Professor Richard Soloway, Margaret Spencer, Sir Laurence Street, Dr Richard Travers, Alison Turtle, Ann Williams and my greatest supporter, John Wyndham.
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 World wide decline in the birth rate, 1871 to 1910</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Attendances at eugenics congresses</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Eugenics organizations in Australian states, 1911 to 1961</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Events with significance for eugenics, 1850s to 1940s</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Reasons for attending birth control clinics in the 1930s</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 The relation of eugenics to other sciences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Populate or perish</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Empty Australia: practically uninhabited</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Next generation calls the eugenics number</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Eldridge at 59</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Goodisson, probably in her 80s</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Aims of the Racial Hygiene Association of NSW</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Sex education: mother's knee or the gutter?</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Only healthy seed must be sown!</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Eugenics Society of Victoria: 1937 syllabus</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Positive eugenics: perfect pair produce four</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Mitchell bequest: hunt for perfect men and women</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Environmental eugenics: good food produces superior teeth</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 The Australian baby: Australia's greatest asset</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Infant deaths in Australia: 1914 to 1917</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Purity feminism: family values not debauchery</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 The unwanted baby</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 VD: the sins of the fathers</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sex education versus sex ignorance</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Alcoholism produces degeneracy</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 RHA pre-marital health examinations</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 RHA Marriage Certificate for Health and Fitness</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Contents

**Tables and Figures**  iv
**Abbreviations**  vi
**Preface**  viii
**Introduction**  1

**Part 1 - Ideas, People and Organizations**

1. **Preserving Australia’s National Stock**  19
   - Racial vitality or racial decay?  20
   - Declining birth-rates  27
   - White Australia  38
   - Populating the tropical north  52

2. **Four Distinctive Eugenists**  68
   - Marion Louisa Piddington - 'Loose cannon'  70
   - John Chambers Eldridge - Labor politician  95
   - Lillie Elizabeth Goodisson - Team leader  105
   - Henry Twitchin - Benefactor  119

3. **Organized Eugenics**  128
   - The language of eugenics  128
   - International eugenics congresses  139
   - Establishing eugenics organizations in Australia  145

**Part 2 - The Practice of Eugenics**

4. **Boosting the Population**  184
   - Positive eugenics  185
   - Baby bonus  191
   - Schools for mothers  201
   - National fitness  207
   - The women’s movement and eugenics  210
   - Suitability of immigrants  216
   - Child migrants from Britain  223

5. **Combating Social Evils**  228
   - Definitions and concepts  228
     - Acquired inheritance  237
     - Nature versus nurture  240
   - The racial poisons  252
     - Venereal diseases - the sins of the fathers  252
     - The taint of tuberculosis  264
     - Prostitution, a threat to the family  266
     - Degenerate drinkers  269
     - A tendency to crime, pauperism and other ills  274

6. **Social Solutions: Eliminating the ‘Unfit’**  280
   - Fertility of the unfit  280
   - Detecting unfitness  283
   - Feared consequences of unfitness  296
   - Solutions  301
     - Marriage restrictions  301
     - Legislation for care, control or sterilization  310

**Conclusion**  336
**Appendix - Terminology**  354
**Bibliography**  361
Abbreviations

AA Australian Archives

AAASRAustralasian Association for the Advancement of Science. Report

ACER Australian Council for Educational Research (Melbourne, Vic)

ACT Australian Capital Territory

ADB Australian Dictionary of Biography, vols 1-2 (1788-1850), vols 3-6 (1851-1890), vols 7-12 (1891-1939) and vol 13 (1940-1980)

AGPS Australian Government Publishing Service (Canberra, ACT)

AJPP Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy (Sydney), 1923-1947

ALP Australian Labor Party

AMCT Australasian Medical Congress. Transactions

AMG Australasian Medical Gazette (Sydney) 1895-1914

AMJ Australian Medical Journal (Melbourne) 1856-1914

ANU Australian National University

ANZAAS Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science

ARHC Australian Racial Hygiene Congress. Report (Sydney, 1929)

BMJ British Medical Journal (London)

CPD Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates

CPP Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers

comp. compiler

CUP Cambridge University Press

ed.(s) editor(s)/edited

edn. edition

EES Eugenics Education Society (London), 1907-1926

EESNSW Eugenics Education Society of NSW (Sydney) 1912-1922

ER Eugenics Review (London) 1909-1968

ESL Eugenics Society (London) 1926-1989, then the Galton Institute

ESV Eugenics Society of Victoria, 1936-1961

FPA Family Planning Association

Govt. Pr. Government Printer

ICMJA Intercolonial Medical Journal of Australasia

IFR Institute of Family Relations (Sydney), Director Marion Piddington
Johns's Notable Australians, 1906;
Johns's Notable Australians and Who is Who in Australasia, 1908;
Fred Johns's Annual, 1912, 1913, 1914.
followed by Who's Who in Australia (Sydney) 1922 +

LD Labor Daily (Sydney) 1922-1940

MJA Medical Journal of Australia (Sydney) 1914 +

ML Mitchell Library, Sydney

NHMRC National Health and Medical Research Council, 1936 +

MUP Melbourne University Press (Parkville, Vic)

NLA National Library of Australia (Canberra, ACT)

NSW New South Wales

NSWPD New South Wales Parliamentary Debates

NSWPP New South Wales Parliamentary Papers

OUP Oxford University Press

Pers. comm. Personal communication

Qld Queensland

RCDBR Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales (Sydney: Govt. Pr., 1904), 2 vols

RHA Racial Hygiene Association of NSW

SA South Australia

SAPD South Australia Parliamentary Debates

SANSW(IG) State Archives of NSW. Inspector General of the Insane. From 1876-1917 it was IG for the Insane, changing to IG of Mental Hospitals from 1918-57

SUP Sydney University Press (Sydney, NSW)

trans. translation, translated by

UNSWP University of New South Wales Press (Kensington, NSW)

UQP University of Queensland Press (St Lucia, Qld)

UWAP University of Western Australia Press (Nedlands, WA)

Vic Victoria

WA Western Australia

WEA Workers' Educational Association

WWW Who Was Who, + cumulated index 1887-1990
(London: Black, 1991)

Who's Who Who's Who in Australia (Melbourne), Herald and Weekly Times, 1922 +
Preface

Between 1905 and 1930, eugenics movements developed in more than 20 countries. However, for many years the vast literature on eugenics focused almost exclusively on its history in Britain and America. While some aspects of eugenics in Australia are now being documented, the history of this movement needed to be written.

In the years from 1911 to 1932, when eugenics blossomed in Australia, a loosely-defined collection of eugenics-related goals for increasing the nation’s fitness were accepted as the norm. The respect inspired by these goals was widely shared, in much the same way as the expectations that citizens would honour God, king, country, the British Empire and the White Australia Policy. However, while eugenics flourished in this period - and its aims were considered scientific, worthwhile and achievable - the idea of producing biologically better people had become suspect by the 1930s.

The positive aura surrounding eugenics early this century was replaced by a shadowy and sinister memory. After the demise of eugenics, it underwent extensive documentary cleansing, with studies of the subject entering a historical hibernation until the 1980s. Since then, an awakening interest in eugenics has been stimulated both by the expanding possibilities of genetic engineering and reproductive technology and by the resurfacing of theories about race and intelligence. Much of this recent historical writing has been cursory, inaccurate or dismissive and these factors influenced me to write this thesis.

In my association with the Family Planning Association of NSW, first as an employee and then as a Board member, I knew that the Association had been called the Racial Hygiene Association until 1960, and that its earlier name was synonymous with eugenics. I discovered more about eugenics in 1987 as part of my research for a Bicentennially-funded project on the history of birth control in Australia. Eugenics featured only peripherally in the book which resulted in 1990, but I decided to begin a study in which it would be central because I was fascinated by the importance of eugenics in the history of public health and because a history of family planning requires an examination of its eugenic underpinnings.
I have drawn on medical and other archives in an attempt to understand the social, political and economic background of the period, to place the study in context, and to analyse eugenic thinking. The list of successful doctors, lawyers, academics and politicians who espoused eugenics reads like a *Who's Who of Australia* for the first half of the 20th century. However, when their obituaries were written, in almost all cases their interest in eugenics was not mentioned. Although eugenics is no longer publicly advocated, its history has relevance for the genome generations of the 1990s and beyond.