

The Faces of Eugenics

The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea.

By E. A. Carlson (2001) Cold Spring Harbor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press. xiv + 451 p. \$39.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-879-69587-0.

A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Explorer to the Birth of Eugenics.

By N. W. Gillham (2001) New York: Oxford University Press. xii + 416 p. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-195-14365-5.

Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics From the Turn of the Century to the Baby Book.

By W. Kline (2001) Berkeley: University of California Press. xv + 218p. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-520-22502-3.

Imagine a time when human genetics was in the news every day because it was the glory field of science, when all manner of extravagant claims about the domination of personality by hereditary factors were being made and taken seriously, and when urban terrorism by foreign political radicals was a clear and present danger in the minds of most Americans. That was the 1920s.

Sacco and Vanzetti might only have been accused of two murders and the theft of \$15,000, but three years after their initial conviction the government passed the Johnson Immigration Restriction Act, drastically curtailing the number of legal Italian newcomers to American shores. Albert Johnson, the bill's sponsor, was on the Advisory Board of the American Eugenics Society and a firm believer in the bad germ-plasm of southern and eastern European immigrants.

Until recently there was hardly any scholarly literature on the science behind the attribution of good and bad

germ-plasm to large groups of people. Only one book on eugenics was published in the 1960s¹ and one more in the 1970s.² The Human Genome Project, however, brought renewed interest in genetics to historians. The serialized publication in *The New Yorker* of what later became Daniel Kevles'³ classic *In the Name of Eugenics* initiated a renaissance of literature on the history of human genetics.

One of the three books being considered here is a new biography, by a biologist (Gillham), of Sir Francis Galton, the man generally revered and reviled as the father of eugenics. Another, also by a biologist (Carlson), provides a general overview of a central idea of eugenics, that there exist large classes of people of generally different value. The third, by an historian (Kline), presents a detailed study of the ways in which sexuality, especially female sexuality, was deemed sufficiently threatening as to require regulation or legislation.

Gillham's biography of Galton is clearly a labor of love; that shows through and gives warmth to the text. The book tells more about certain aspects of its subject than I really wanted to know, yet still somehow manages to leave me feeling as though I had not really encountered Galton. For example, Gillham not only dwells on Galton's feud with Henry M. ("Dr. Livingstone, I presume") Stanley and Galton's attempts to expose Morton's humble ancestry, but also mentions Galton's own childlessness. However, Gillham never attempts to relate these aspects of Galton's life to the overriding obsessions—ancestry and fertility—of the movement he founded.

Somewhat more intrusive is Gillham's consistent depiction of Galton in relation to modern ideas. What is lacking is a modern relativistic approach that places Galton's ideas in their nineteenth-century context, not in our twenty-first-century context. On p. 157, Gillham says that a speculation of Galton's "anticipated by almost 20 years August Weismann's experimentally supported theory of the continuity of the germ line." Well, maybe and maybe not. Somewhat

later we learn that "Galton had made a novel prediction arguing that 'capacity, zeal, and vigour' segregate like genetically independent traits" (p. 163)—rather like the work on peas by you-know-who. And yet Galton's Mendelism occurs in the context of discussions of "dilutions of the blood," suggesting conceptions that are actually rather far removed from modern ones. Later we learn of another of Galton's theories and terms, that "effectively the stirp was equivalent to what we would call the genome" (p. 181). And, citing Galton's statement that "each of the enormous number of quasi-independent units the body is made up of, has a separate origin, or germ," Gillham obligingly translates: "The modern equivalent would be that each gene specifies a different protein" (p. 182). Later in the same paragraph, Gillham credits Galton with "a vague glimmer of the concepts of dominance and recessiveness."

Glimmer or no, it's hard to take such reactionary historiography too seriously. Galton's ideas can only be meaningfully comprehended in their own context, not in ours. It does neither him nor the historiographic enterprise much credit to attempt to do otherwise.

This life of Galton, a straightforward read and meticulously researched, comes with the most famous stories, his use of a sextant to measure the steatopygic ass of his host's wife without causing embarrassment; his measurement, of the efficacy of prayer; and his charting of the heredity of "prominence." In all, although the book is not without drawbacks, but decidedly worthwhile reading.

Wendy Kline's *Building a Better Race* is a focused and deeply probing account of the eugenic fixation on reproduction and the way that scientific ideas interlaced with conservative morality. She explores the way in which "feeble-minded morons" came to be invented, then came to be increasingly seen as genetically tainted, and epitomized as unwed mothers and prostitutes. She focuses on the records of the Sonoma State Home

for the feeble-minded, which led California and the nation in the number of salpingectomies performed on poor women over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, and effectively demonstrates a sexual double standard: men were sent there for criminal reasons, women for social reasons. Klein's centerpiece is the transformation of eugenic sterilization from a racial to a moral crusade, evidenced in the now-forgotten case of Ann Cooper Hewitt in 1936. The plaintiff, an heiress whose father's will included a stipulation that her inheritance would revert to her mother if she died childless, found that, at her mother's request, she had been sterilized during an appendectomy. Although the sterilization was justified on the grounds that Hewitt was a moron, she was nevertheless smart enough to sue. What resulted was a public referendum on heredity, stupidity, greed, and motherhood. This is the book that I found most rewarding of the three: history as studied and explicated by an historian, probing a bit of American culture and relating the science of the age to the broader themes of morals and social change.

Carlson's *The Unfit* is, to some extent, the most ambitious of the three books in its scope, it also is ultimately the most disappointing in that it is more than willing to trade depth and thematic continuity for breadth. The text flits across a wide range of eugenics-related topics, some of more obvious relevance than others, but never pauses on any long enough to give it the benefit of detailed treatment.

Carlson's book is still worthwhile, for there is a great deal here that would make it the most assignable of the lot for an introductory class. There are interesting discussions of the works of Thomas Malthus, David Starr Jordan, and other key figures. It's the next step that this book takes only haltingly.

Carlson focuses, strangely enough, on male masturbation and sterilizing operations, hardly mentioning women. His book begins, indeed, with the assertion that masturbation was the first condition to be medically categorized as an indication of a constitutional defect. This is the starting point for Carlson's discussion of "the unfit":

those degraded masses that eugenicists targeted for action. Once again, though, there is a cultural problem for the biologist studying history—starting a discussion of unfitness with the Bible without questioning whether or not the meanings are consistent across the millennia. The nontreatment of gender as an issue is odd as well. The data shown on page 215 demonstrate the problem with leaving it as Carlson does. Through 1940, nearly 36,000 Americans had been involuntarily sterilized. Within this group, approximately equal numbers of men and women had been deemed "insane," but twice as many women as men had been deemed "feeble-minded."

Presumably, that is why Kline wrote her book. But this betrays the consistent failing of Carlson's otherwise well-written and thoughtful narration: large errors of omission that are hard to justify in the modern era of historical scholarship on the eugenics movement. For example, Carlson appropriately discusses euthanasia in the context of the Nazis, but makes no mention of the infant euthanasia campaign initiated by an American doctor, Harry Haiselden, or his silent movie about it, "The Black Stork."⁴

Consider also Carlson's treatment of Rudolf Virchow. He mentions Virchow in passing only in the context of his support of public hygiene in nineteenth-century Germany. This stance earns Virchow the top spot in Carlson's flow chart on the rise of Nazi eugenics, which ends with Mengele, the Auschwitz camp doctor (with a doctorate in physical anthropology).

The truth, however, is not only more inflected, but very nearly the opposite. Virchow, a well-known political liberal, opposed Ernst Haeckel's version of Darwinism, which began with the amoeba and ended with the Aryan Prussian state. Virchow used his clout to keep Haeckelism out of the journals and posts he controlled, and was also well known for his public position against anti-Semitism.⁵ On his death, Virchow's obituary in *Science* was written by his former protégé, Franz Boas, who recently had been hired by Columbia University as a physical anthropologist and who, of course, took up the mantle of liberal

humanism in science. Thus, for Carlson to position Virchow as the seminal node on a flowchart culminating in the Holocaust is grossly unfair.

Carlson's chapter on "the abandonment of eugenics by genetics" is similarly problematic. He attributes the fall of the eugenics movement to the recognition that theory and data in genetics did not validate the central principles of eugenics. This is a "presentist" projection, however, for it fails to explain why nearly all of the leading geneticists remained on the advisory board of the American Eugenics Society through the 1920s. Nor can it account for a passage like this in the first edition of a widely used 1925 textbook of genetics: "Even under the most favorable surroundings there would still be a great many individuals who are always on the border line of self-supporting existence and whose contribution to society is so small that the elimination of their stock would be beneficial."⁶ Several years ago, Paul and Spencer showed that new genetic knowledge had little or nothing to do with the fall of the eugenics movement. Rather, there was a growing appreciation for human rights and civil liberties in the scientific community, particularly as those rights and liberties were being curtailed in Germany.⁷

The first vocal critics of eugenics were nonbiologists like Boas⁸ and civil libertarians like Clarence Darrow, who vilified the movement in H. L. Mencken's literary magazine *The American Mercury* a year after the Scopes trial.⁹ The following year, 1927, Raymond Pearl became the first biologist to criticize the movement explicitly in print, in the same forum as Darrow.¹⁰ His article was widely noted in contemporary newspapers and cost him a job offer from Harvard. Pearl's colleague at Johns Hopkins, bacterial geneticist Herbert Spencer Jennings, had quietly removed his name from the American Eugenics Society advisory board. He had done so after reviewing the genetic evidence for a European cline in criminality, discovering that Harry Laughlin had massaged the data before presenting it to Congress, and receiving no response about that from the president of the American Eugen-

ics Society, Yale economist Irving Fisher. In late 1923 he published a critique of Laughlin's statistics in *The Survey* at the invitation of the editor, Bruno Lasker (Gabe's father).¹¹ None of this shows up in any form in Carlson's book, which takes Hermann Muller's¹² 1932 address, "The dominance of economics over eugenics" as its sole benchmark for the downfall of the eugenics movement. I do not mean to disparage Muller's courageous and insightful paper, but simply to note that it came fairly late in the game.

Finally, Carlson's narrative jumps from the (eugenic) Holocaust to (eugenic) genetic counseling without pausing to catch its breath. In fact, there is a very interesting story in between: the reinvention of eugenics from a social program to a family-oriented medical program after World War II, led principally by geneticists James V. Neel and L. C. Dunn. Part of this reinvention involved promoting the work of Archibald Garrod as a founder of human genetics, although his work had not been previously acknowledged in that field. Consequently, eugenics could be discussed as a good thing in more modern textbooks like the classic *The Genetics of Human Populations* by Cavalli-Sforza

and Bodmer.¹³ These authors simply capitalized on the discontinuity in the term's application and used it in a different sense than had Charles Davenport, Albert Wiggam, and Madison Grant, the people who originally popularized it. They could also distinguish between bad "negative eugenics" and good "positive eugenics" without acknowledging the real problem to be their desire for state intervention in family matters. Thus, when Patrick Tierney¹⁴ in *Darkness in El Dorado* sensationally reveals that Neel was a "eugenicist," the discovery is about as meaningful as discovering that Jesse Jackson is a Democrat, a member of George Wallace's party.

Historians sometime talk about the apocryphal brain surgeon who took up the history of the field in his retirement, but recoiled at the idea of historians taking up brain surgery in their retirement. In all, it is great for biologists to be interested in history, but there is no substitute for the work of real historians.

REFERENCES

1 Haller M. 1963. Eugenics: hereditarian attitudes in American thought. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

2 Ludmerer K. 1972. Genetics and American society: a historical appraisal. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

3 Kevles DJ. 1985. In the name of eugenics. Berkeley: University of California Press.

4 Pernick M. 1996. The black stork. New York: Oxford University Press.

5 Massin B. 1996. From Virchow to Fischer: physical anthropology and "modern race theories" in Wilhelmine Germany. In: Stocking G, editor. *Volksgeist as method and ethic: essays on Boasian ethnography and the German anthropological tradition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. p 79-154.

6 Sinnott EW, Dunn LC. 1925. Principles of genetics. New York: McGraw-Hill.

7 Paul DB, Spencer HG. 1995. The hidden science of eugenics. *Nature* 375:302-304.

8 Boas F. 1916. Eugenics. *Sci Monthly* 3:471-479.

9 Darrow C. 1926. The eugenics cult. *Mercury* 8:129-137.

10 Pearl R. 1927. The biology of superiority. *Mercury* 12:257-266.

11 Jennings HS. 1923. Undesirable aliens. *Survey* 51:309-312, 364.

12 Muller JH. 1933. The dominance of economics over eugenics. *Sci Monthly* 37:40-47.

13 Cavalli-Sforza LL, Bodmer W. 1971. The genetics of human populations. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

14 Tierney P. 2000. *Darkness in El Dorado*. New York: Norton.

Jonathan Marks

Department of Sociology and
Anthropology

University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Charlotte, NC 28223

E-mail: jmarks@email.uncc.edu

© 2002 Wiley-Liss, Inc.