

Eugenics at the Edges of Empire

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Editors

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New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa

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FOREWORD

This is a history of eugenics written from New Zealand outwards. Its antipodean editorial and substantive location helps us to understand eugenics in fresh ways. Most importantly, it brings us close to scholarship on settler colonialism, and the sense in which population quantity and quality was core to that historical project. Vital nationalism in settler colonies was fundamentally driven by the future prospects for, and progressive achievement of, hygiene and population health through purposeful reproductive management. This was quite different from the degeneration anxieties that drove so much European eugenics. As these chapters show, health, race, sex and nation were conflated in settler colonial nations in the antipodes, North America and southern Africa. No wonder eugenics thrived. Lands of freethinkers, progressives, and social welfare experiments, these were new world political and cultural contexts in which managed reproduction and heredity became deeply civic matters.

This book deepens our understanding of just how and why eugenics was such a familiar idea in the early twentieth century. We learn how eugenics morphed into quotidian public health and mental health and welfare structures of the era, and into seemingly progressive education plans. Chapters also clarify the eugenic measures over which there was consistent concern and anxiety; in particular sterilization and legislation to regulate marriage. Sterilization is the historical and historiographical touchstone for scholars of eugenic policy and practice. Inventories of states which did or did not enact compulsory laws are standard in the scholarship. Yet here we learn much more about the spectrum

of arguments, how easily state legislatures in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada might have passed more pressing eugenic laws, but equally why they often did not. This is part of the history of liberalism in the British world: at the end of the day, the Canadian states which did pass and enact sterilization laws were the outliers. To understand eugenics fully, we do need to comprehend local as well as shared political and social debate about consent and coercion within a liberalism that was being tested in the early twentieth century. Especially—as I have argued elsewhere—the power of the idea of voluntariness for eugenicists (and even, counterintuitively, ‘freedom’), is critical to address.

New Zealand, Australian, Canadian and South African eugenics is often analysed by social and cultural historians of race, gender and nationalism, and this collection displays that particular historiographical strength. Yet Diane Paul, Hamish Spencer and John Stenhouse together approach the history of eugenics from a slightly different scholarly tradition: through the history of genetics. I fully agree with, and applaud their insight set out in the Introduction, that we need to rethink the idea that eugenicists were bad scientists. That was a somewhat lazy analytical position that historians of eugenics held for many years: a convenient critique when the mathematics and genetics were hard, but hardly a supportable one. It is true that eugenics was easily and successfully popularized into better baby contests, maternal and infant welfare schemes, and widespread support for immigration restriction based on mental health, physical health and racial criteria. This is the terrain of the cultural, social and political historian. But so many of the twentieth-century’s great population geneticists were drawn to the prospect of the social application of their theories. This was an era when being a biologist and being political—and often on the left—was a common enough proposition. The history of eugenics is impoverished when we underestimate the complexity of the genetics that underwrote and drove forward the social and legal application of eugenic measures. Historians of science and geneticists are required.

This new history of eugenics offers a range of historical actors, both unexpected and familiar. We learn about Māori—Āpirana Ngata and Peter Buck—who shaped biological anthropology, an expertise related to eugenics, but not necessarily coterminous. We learn about social reformer and politician William Pember Reeves, and about Truby King, the iconic New Zealand figure in that archetypal early twentieth-century

enterprise, ‘mothercraft’. The sometimes facile finger-pointing to historical figures declared to be a ‘eugenicist’—the common tendency to perform a eugenic exposé—is here itself exposed. But nor is this an apology. Rather, we see the value of subtle argumentation from historians alert to the spectrum of changing and disputed ideas about heredity and environment.

The history of eugenics always requires, and invites, the careful study of race. The chapters herein show that crude arguments that ‘eugenics’ was coterminous with ‘race science’ are insufficient. Indeed, we learn that eugenicists were perhaps least influential in the polity in which race science was most influential in policy terms: in segregated and apartheid South Africa. There, it is argued, pre-existing rationales for policies based on racial differences diminished eugenics’ power, or at least made eugenics less necessary. At the same time, maintaining and improving the health and purity of a threatened white population was a declared imperative. For settler-colonies-turned-new-nations, the quality and quantity of ‘whiteness’ was paramount, as many chapters here detail.

Crucially, eugenics’ heyday happened to coincide with the formation of new national polities—Australia in 1901 and South Africa in 1910—and dominion status for Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa in the aftermath of the Imperial Conference in London in 1907. Nation-building within a racially alert transnational context is the key context for understanding eugenics in the Dominions. There is thus a particular history of eugenics in this British world, at least as much about the early twentieth-century period as anything else. This is perhaps the most significant rationale for a collected history of eugenics in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Canada. It is long overdue, and I commend the editors and contributors for seizing the opportunity, the rich challenge and the intellectual reward of bringing these histories together.

Jesus College, Cambridge

Alison Bashford

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The papers have all been substantially revised for the volume, with several new contributions solicited to fill geographic and topical gaps.

The editors are most grateful to Alison Bashford for writing the Foreword to the book. We would like to thank Molly Beck and Oliver Dyer at Palgrave Macmillan for their work in helping the project to a successful conclusion, and Erika Dyck for her insightful contributions to the Introduction.

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