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## Erika Dyck. Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice

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and the Oscilloclast), had become the focus of Dower's treatments, based on his belief in the emergence of an "Age of Radiance," where new 'electron theory' superseded the 'cell theory' of disease" (p. 178).

Ivey concludes by suggesting that Halcyon's most lasting legacy may lie in the community's mystical and occult influences on modern movements in art, music, and science. The experimental composer Henry Dixon Cowell, the poets John Osborne Varian and Ella Young, the physicist George Russell Harrison, and the co-inventors of the klystron, brothers Russell and Sigurd Varian, each lived for at least a time within the theosophical community at Halcyon and imbibed its fascination with electrical and vibrational realities.

This well-researched and clearly written monograph effectively demonstrates once again that an institutional history can come alive when its author combines the best of cultural, intellectual, and biographical approaches to the scholarship. Ivey's capable work has provided historians of science, medicine, and religion with a detailed and insightful view of a little-known American Progressive Era movement's efforts to form a unified theory of the universe that blended the new discoveries of science and medicine with ancient spiritual truths. Although we may smile at what may appear to be their misguided effort, we can nonetheless admire the fervor and tenacity with which they pursued their vision of an enlightened world of peace.

Rennie B. Schoepflin

Erika Dyck. *Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice*. xi + 304 pp., illus., bibl., index. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. \$29.95 (paper).

Readers already familiar with the multitude of works on the history of eugenics might wonder if we need another such study, focusing as this one does on a single Canadian province (especially in light of Angus McLaren's earlier *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885–1945* [Toronto, 1990]). The answer is, however, yes, since the current work by the historian of medicine Erika Dyck presents the history of eugenics as just one part in the much larger twentieth-century debates about reproductive rights, women's autonomy, and the personal consequences for those who suffered involuntary sterilization or were trying to make difficult personal and family decisions in changing economic, social, political, and moral climates. Although focusing primarily on the province of Alberta (one of only two Canadian provinces that passed a compulsory eugenic sterilization law in 1928; the other was British Columbia), there is considerable value to this approach, as it makes it possible to situate eugenics in the context of other movements with which it shared the stage at various points in time. The book is truly, as the author promises, "a social history of sexual sterilization and the politics of reproductive choice in Alberta" (p. 18), combining more conventional sociological analyses of large-scale movements such as eugenics, sterilization and birth control, feminism, mental illness, disability rights, and institutionalization with the experiences of the men and women who were involved in one way or another, as victims, reformers, health care providers, and social workers. The book covers the earlier period (1880s–1940s) typical of most eugenic studies but carries the issues through to recent developments (and recurring debates) in the post–World War II period and beyond.

Except for the introduction and conclusion, the chapters are organized around specific examples of individuals involved in the long and tortuous history of reproductive rights. The introduction presents a relatively abbreviated historiography of eugenics, pointing out that more recent authors have tried to cast the topic in the context of postwar movements for population control, family planning, and other related issues. The aim laid out here is to show how eugenics was not simply a movement of uninformed or overzealous scientific reformers, but was more complex and nuanced in its development and application. Chapter 1, "Vagrancy, Violence, and Virtue," takes as its starting point the arrest of Nora Powers in 1924 for immoral behavior after she deserted her husband and family; she was declared "weak minded" and

became the prototype of the hereditarily unworthy. The chapter focuses on the rise of the feminist movement in the plains, through reform-minded populist leaders of the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFAW), a group known as the “Famous Five,” and their support for eugenic legislation as a means of women’s liberation. Chapter 2 begins with the case of a “First Nations,” or aboriginal, Canadian, George Pierre, who was diagnosed with “catatonic schizophrenia” in the 1930s, committed to a provincial hospital, and brought before the Eugenics Board for sterilization. The chapter describes in detail the functioning of the Eugenics Board established by the Sexual Sterilization Act and the important role that IQ tests played in determining approval for sterilization. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on differential attitudes toward female and male sterilization, respectively. Here the author counters the general impressions from earlier histories of eugenics that it was mainly women who were the objects of sterilization and that Catholics always opposed the process, even for severe cases of retardation. Dyck makes the important point in these chapters that eugenics was as much, or more, a tool of class discrimination as of racism.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the changing attitudes toward sterilization from the close of World War II to the end of the twentieth century, especially in conjunction with the rising feminist demands for women’s reproductive rights. Dyck emphasizes the highly arbitrary criteria developed and applied for labeling people, especially children and young adolescents in the various “training schools,” as mentally defective, retarded, and genetically disabled. The Leilani Muir case, in which a woman successfully sued the Alberta government for wrongful sterilization she had undergone as a mentally defective moron, received international attention in the mid 1990s and prompted hundreds of Canadians to step forward and demand similar settlements (all the settlements were small compared to Muir’s, and the cases were settled out of court). The penultimate chapter deals with the recent (early twenty-first-century) revival of debates about birth control and the sterilization of supposedly genetically defective individuals. With the rise of the new conservatism in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, Dyck emphasizes that pro-life forces have renewed their efforts to curtail all abortions and even to restrict the availability of birth control programs.

While the earlier chapters cover ground that has been dealt with in other histories, it is Chapters 5–7, dealing with the very detailed personal cases, that form the most original aspect of the book and are consequently the most gripping. Stories such as Muir’s, reconstructed from a multitude of diaries and other unpublished as well as published sources, shed extremely important light on issues such as who and what is considered “mentally defective,” how economic and social circumstances affect childhood development and hence later IQ and other mental assessments, and how victims of harsh treatment in earlier eras can turn the scales and become social and political activists on their own behalf. The trials and tribulations of Leilani Muir’s early life, and also those of Doreen Befus, render their efforts on behalf of disabled patients particularly impressive and very personal.

*Facing Eugenics* is a well-researched account of the complex social history surrounding the development of eugenics and reproductive issues. Dyck had to construct many parts of the story from fragments of information, as the Canadian government has destroyed over 80 percent of the documents relating to the implementation of the sterilization law and the fates of many of its victims. While the focus of each chapter on individual cases is interesting, it encounters several problems. The first is that some cases are relatively well documented (Doreen Befus and Leilani Muir), while others (George Pierre) are based on the scantiest of information. The personal focus also makes following the chronology a bit confusing as the cases overlap in time, so that at the conclusion of one case it is necessary to step back in time to pick up the beginning of the next. And, as a historian interested in the genetic side of the story, I could have wished for more detailed treatment of the fallacies of the hereditarian arguments presented to the Eugenics Board. A reader unfamiliar with the specific claims for a genetic basis for low IQ or hereditary aggressiveness, for example, would simply have to accept the author’s assessment, along with a few quotations from individuals at the time, that the genetics was naive and ill informed.

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