

LADD-TAYLOR, Molly – *Fixing the Poor: Eugenic Sterilization and Child Welfare in the Twentieth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. 275.

The state of Indiana passed the first eugenic sterilization law in 1907, and over the next eighty years thirty-two states sterilized more than 63,000 Americans often without prior consent and at times without the patient's knowledge. For historians, eugenic sterilization has become a set-piece illustrating the hubris of the high-modernist faith in medical authority with sinister echoes of the Nazi quest for racial purity. In this poignant study of the state of Minnesota's eugenic sterilization program, Molly Ladd-Taylor provides a sobering reassessment anchored to evidence that gives voice to the heartbreaking experience of the men and women who became the subjects of Minnesota's sterilization program. Ladd-Taylor argues that so much scholarly attention has focused on outliers, such as states with high-sterilization rates or zealous eugenicists, that valuable narratives about the average experience has been overlooked. Minnesota provides an ideal case study because it sterilized a modest number of people (2,350) more or less on a voluntary basis with few active partnerships between the program and the eugenics movement. As Ladd-Taylor argues, this book is a social history focused on the routine "social welfare policies that aimed to solve the problems of poverty, sex, and single motherhood by 'fixing' the poor" (p. 2). As such, Ladd-Taylor's research is part of a revision among scholars to highlight how American understandings of the connections between poverty, behavior, and reproduction have changed and persisted into the present.

Eugenic sterilization was born out of the crises of the Gilded Age, when growing urban populations composed of ethnically diverse immigrants stretched social support systems to the breaking point during the boom and bust cycles that characterized the time period. Ladd-Taylor argues that two Gilded Age ideas would inform eugenic policies throughout the twentieth century. The first was the identification of a two-tiered understanding of poverty and an impulse to distinguish between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor through "scientific charity" (p. 27). The second was the invention of childhood as a distinct and fragile stage of development necessary to producing fully realized citizens and workers. Scientific charity gained coherence in the 1870s and 1880s with the publication of Richard Dugdale's 1877 eugenic study of the Jukes family and Frederick Wine's demographic analysis of "defective" classes for the 1880 census. These two studies confidently tied poverty to genetics and attempted to quantify the economic and social costs of, in Wine's phrasing, the "morphology of evil" (p. 29). In creating its first poor law in 1864, the state of Minnesota recognized a public responsibility for addressing poverty that blossomed into a flirtation with socialism during the People's Party movement of the 1890s, which advocated systemic reform of society to uplift the deserving poor. By the Progressive Era, scientific charity had merged with eugenics to focus on the childhood environment. For Ladd-Taylor, the passage of Minnesota's Children's Code in 1917 served as "the foundation of its eugenic sterilization law" because it encoded these earlier understandings

into law and empowered the state to “impose certain behavioral and economic standards on the poor” (pp. 26, 56).

As the Children’s Code swamped Minnesota’s aging institutions, Ladd-Taylor details how welfare officials viewed sterilization as a solution to poverty. Ladd-Taylor is at her best when situating Minnesota’s experience in the larger context of American history, such as the Progressive Era imperative to quantify and categorize every facet of economic and social life. As Victorian social norms of female behavior clashed with the ascendant dance hall culture of the Jazz Age, the more traditional social welfare agents at the Minnesota Board of Control came into conflict with such hardcore eugenicists as Guy C. Hanna, the superintendent at the Faribault School for the Feebleminded. Ladd-Taylor reconstructs these battles by mining rich local collections. While Hanna believed that feeble-mindedness was a hereditary condition and “the principle cause of all human misery and suffering,” the feminist reformer Blanche La Du at the Board of Control situated the cause of poverty and “feeble-mindedness” in the environment, not genetics (pp. 74, 69).

The Second World War and the economic recovery from the Depression signaled the death knell of eugenic sterilization in Minnesota. The war mobilized medical resources and nurses to distant theatres, stripping Minnesota of the necessary labour to continue surgical sterilization (p. 147). As the country enjoyed the postwar economic boom, Ladd-Taylor argues that a “new kind of administrative state” eroded Gilded Age notions about the roots of poverty (p. 156). Critics of eugenics gained strength in the press, while changing social norms loosened the connections between premarital sexuality and degeneracy, and media coverage of the Nuremberg trials associated eugenics with Nazi war crimes (p. 173, 177). With the decision *In re Masters* (1944) the Minnesota Supreme Court issued a unanimous rejection of the eugenic argument underlying the state’s sterilization law: that “feeble-mindedness” was neither “permanent” nor “incurable” (p. 172). The shifting attitudes produced leadership changes that spelled the end of sterilization in Minnesota. When David J. Vail became the director of the state’s medical services at the Department of Public Welfare he launched a campaign to overturn decades of “dehumanizing practices” culminating in the cessation of eugenic sterilizations in 1961 (pp. 194, 197).

Ladd-Taylor argues that prosperity did not heal all wounds. The creation of the modern welfare state during the New Deal may have “widened the boundary of who was considered deserving of government aid,” but it did not abolish the association of poverty with individual failure (p. 176). Deinstitutionalization has likewise produced bitter fruit, including the resurrection of eugenic sterilization now garbed in neoliberal trappings. The privately organized Project Prevention, for instance, offers direct payments to women struggling with substance abuse in exchange for their consent to sterilization or long-term birth control (p. 224). Ladd-Taylor’s most terrifying conclusion is that we have overlooked the materialist base upon which eugenic sterilization stood: an underfunded welfare system that created an environment where eugenic ideas could find purchase. Not only do these conditions exist today but a resurgent neoliberal political culture has

reawakened Gilded Age notions that cast populations dependent on state support as criminal, deviant, and inherently irredeemable.

Ladd-Taylor's narrative invites comparisons to landmark social histories from the past half century. Her description of how communities (and even families) took advantage of Minnesota's institutions and welfare policies to achieve suspect social goals recalls the work of Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum in *Salem Possessed* (1974) (p. 130). By examining how the state of Minnesota targeted women and Native Americans for eugenic sterilization, Ladd-Taylor finds affinities with recent scholarship about the racial and gender dimensions of incarceration and institutionalization by Michelle Alexander and Brenda Child. In arguing that eugenic sterilization "is inseparable from the professionalization of obstetrics and gynecology," Ladd-Taylor places her text in conversation with Judith Walzer-Leavitt's classic history of the medicalization of childbirth (p. 126). Ladd-Taylor's engaging storytelling and sophisticated analysis calls on readers to consider the implications of eugenic sterilization and child welfare policy beyond the book's modest geographic boundaries.

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LIVESAY, Daniel – *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733-1833*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. 411.

Historians of modern Britain have long sought to explain why racial prejudice increased from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, why being not fully white came to mean being not British over these years. In *Children of Uncertain Fortune*, Daniel Livesay offers a highly original explanation. Rather than looking to natural philosophies of race or national political discourses, Livesay argues that hardening racial ideologies were the product of negotiating membership within mixed-race imperial families. He bases this conclusion on a study of 360 mixed-race children he was able to track through wills and other legal documents who were sent from Jamaica to Britain between 1733 and 1833 for education or to advance their prospects in other ways. While there were likely thousands of mixed-race children who made this transatlantic crossing over the century, even this larger group represents a small minority of individuals born to a white father and a black or mixed-race mother; only about 20% of such children were manumitted in their fathers' wills, and fewer still were openly acknowledged during their fathers' lifetimes. Nonetheless, the experiences of elite migrants of colour in Britain, along with the debates and anxieties their presence triggered, are revealing. Above all, they show that before many influential Britons publicly wrestled with questions about race, imperial obligations, and who belonged in the