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THE EUGENICS SOCIETY ARCHIVES IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDICAL ARCHIVES CENTRE

by

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Eugenics is the science which deals with all influences which improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those which develop them to the utmost advantage.
(Sir Francis Galton, 1822–1911)

The Eugenics Society's archives were among the earliest collections acquired by the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre, in February 1980, just over a year after its inauguration. At that time the collection consisted only of correspondence and other files, the minutes and press-cuttings books being retained by the Society and consultable there by appointment with the General Secretary. In spite of this considerable lacuna, the Eugenics Society's archive has consistently proved the most heavily consulted of all the collections in the CMAC, attracting a large number of readers, many of whom return year by year, pursuing a wide variety of research interests.¹ In 1988, on the Society's move from 69 Eccleston Square near Victoria Station to smaller premises less centrally located, the remaining archives—minutes (excluding certain volumes of council minutes), press-cutting books, some financial records, various odd items discovered while clearing out the Society's premises, and records of bodies closely associated with the Society—were transferred to the CMAC. This meant that the collection became even stronger, particularly respecting the earlier, pre-1920, years of the Society's existence, for which few files had survived.

The Society was founded in 1907 as the Eugenics Education Society (the name was changed in 1926) with Sir Francis Galton as Honorary President: he was the coiner of the word "eugenics", as well as Charles Darwin's cousin. Unlike the Galton Laboratory, founded in 1904 and also inspired by Galton's ideas, the Eugenics Education Society was a popular rather than a scientific institution. Its initial aims and objects were as follows:

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¹ Because the Eugenics Society and the eugenics movement as a whole have already been the subject of considerable historiographical investigation, a select list of further reading is appended to this paper.

- 1) Persistently to set forth the national importance of eugenics in order to modify public opinion and create a sense of responsibility, in respect of bringing all matters pertaining to human parenthood under the domination of eugenic ideals.
- 2) To spread a knowledge of the laws of heredity so far as they are surely known and so far as the knowledge might effect improvement of the race.
- 3) To further eugenics teaching at home, in the schools, and elsewhere.

These aims were modified and expanded over the years, so that by 1944 the *Aims and Objects* of the Society took up a 12-page leaflet.

The Society's membership was never very large. Even in its peak years (1911 and 1932/33) there were never more than 800 members and usually considerably fewer. The society did, however have an influence beyond its small size, particularly after 1930, in which year it received a large legacy from Henry Twitchin, a wealthy Australian sheep-farmer and convinced eugenicist. From 1933 the Society occupied permanent premises in Eccleston Square, which included a superb library (its books are now in the Wellcome Institute Library), offices, and meeting rooms which were also used by other bodies whose interests overlapped with those of the Eugenics Society. The Society held meetings, published a journal (*The Eugenics Review*), endowed lectures and research fellowships, and was able to fund investigations in fields which were deemed to have relevance to the objects of the Society. Besides this economic comfort and permanent premises, advantages which many similar organizations of the period did not enjoy, the Society was fortunate in having as members and Fellows, or represented on its Consultative Committee, many persons of distinction and influence.

A permanent home and the employment of paid staff meant that the records of the Eugenics Society have had a much better chance of survival than those of contemporary organizations which may have had a larger membership and wider influence but lacked these assets. It is clear that for the earlier years of the Society, when these conditions did not pertain, not such a remarkable proportion of the archive remains. This very fact of survival where others have perished without trace may have tended to exaggerate the significance of the Eugenics Society and eugenicist thought in the 1920s and 1930s. However, it is clear, quite separately from the endeavours of the Society to bring about eugenic awareness, that there were pervasive if vague notions to be found in nearly all levels of British society about good and bad breeding. This is evidenced in, for example, letters received by the Society seeking information about sterilization operations, and requesting advice about fitness for marriage, usually from the conscientious middle-class couples whom one would have imagined were the very people the Society was hoping to encourage to breed. It can also be deduced from the report sheets submitted by the lecturers sent out by the Society to address all sorts of groups up and down the country. These mentioned the questions and comments of their audiences (or of passers-by at Eugenics Society stands at health exhibitions), and from these it can be seen that not only was a somewhat naïve hereditarianism common, but that there was often considerable support for legislative measures such as sterilization from bodies that are not usually perceived as particularly in sympathy with the Eugenics Society, for example the Women's Cooperative Guild.

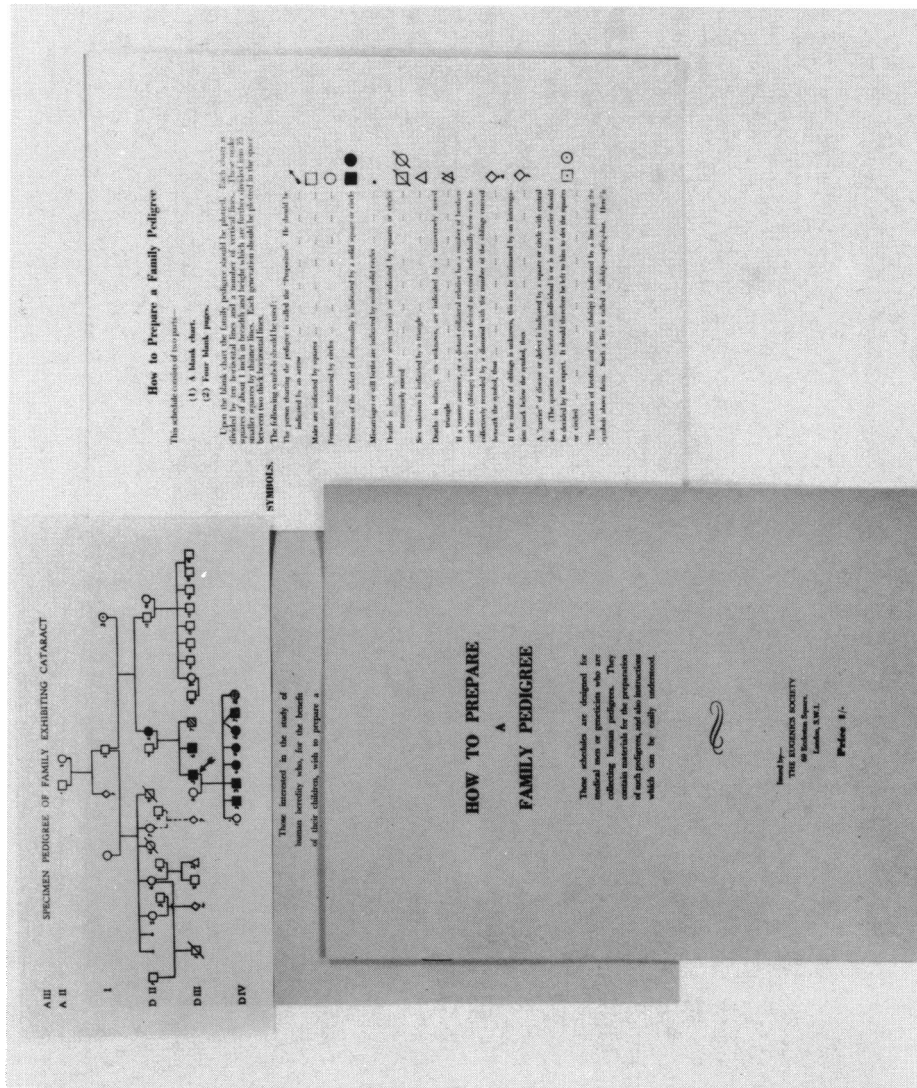


Plate 1. CMAC: SA/EUG/F.8. Booklet prepared by the Society explaining how to compile a family pedigree. Besides being of research interest, these were also used to help individuals determine whether there were any hereditary defects which might affect their own offspring. (Photo: Wellcome Institute Library, London.)



Plate 2. CMAC: SA/EUG/G.43. Poster "Healthy Seed": this poster, which, from the address given and the style, would appear to have been produced during the 1930s, conveys a message of negative eugenics—"check the seeds of hereditary disease and unfitnes". (Photo: Wellcome Institute Library, London.)



Plate 4. CMAC: SA/EUG/O.17. Presentation to C. P. Blacker in 1957 of the Galton Medal of the Society for his services to it as General Secretary 1932–53, by C. G. Darwin, the grandson of Charles Darwin. (Photo: Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

While the above reservations should be borne in mind, it must be said that this collection is, as demonstrated by the great diversity of research it has been used for, a very rich and multifaceted archive. Among the many subjects in which the Society took an interest were the treatment of the physically and mentally handicapped, and social policy concerning them, the development of birth control provision, the legalization of sterilization, the use of artificial insemination, intelligence testing, family allowances and the taxation system, sex education, demography, genetics, the compilation of pedigrees (see plate 1), pre-marital health examinations, statistics, marriage guidance, abortion law reform, social medicine, and public health. Much correspondence of individuals with the Society survives. Besides the members and Fellows, many distinguished persons who never actually joined were in some way associated with the Society and its activities. On a single page of the list can be found the names of Aldous Huxley, Sir Julian Huxley, Dean Inge, Wing-Commander Sir Archibald James, Alice Jenkins, D. Caradog Jones, Lord and Lady Keynes, Professor François Lafitte, Dr. R. Langdon-Down, and Mrs. F. Laski: that is, persons distinguished in the arts, the sciences, the social sciences, the Church, politics, economics, medicine, and the birth control movement.

There was constant debate within the Society both about what its aims ought to be and how they could be best achieved. The views of the members were seldom if ever homogeneous. There was dissension between those demanding immediate reforms on an eugenic basis, the advocates of education and persuasion rather than compulsion, and those who believed that before determining upon any course of action further investigations into the subject were necessary. From the Society's inception there was a constant tension between "positive" eugenics, or encouraging those perceived as "fit" to have more children than many of them appeared to be doing (see fig. 1), and "negative" eugenics, or discouraging, if not preventing, those perceived as "unfit" from breeding as recklessly as it was feared they were (see plate 2). While "fit" and "unfit" might be neutral scientific concepts in evolutionary biology, they were continually liable to be infected by existing social values of race and class. Eugenists, mostly upwardly-mobile members of a meritocratic middle class, were inclined to despise the aristocracy and regard it as decadent, its power enshrined by social custom rather than true considerations of fitness, but this very notion of its decadence meant that it might be expected to wither away within a few generations. The feckless working classes were another matter entirely, although within the Society many members would have made a distinction between the good working class, a necessary element in society, and the "underclass". The high fecundity of the apparently less desirable elements in Society was believed by some (for example Karl Pearson of the Galton Laboratory, although he was never in fact a member of the Society) to be the result of misguided environmental measures tending to preserve lives better lost. The class bias in the determination of desirability can be deduced from the Society's arguments that the existing system of taxation and the costs of education were leading the middle classes to restrict their families because of the financial burden laid upon them, with ultimately dysgenic effects upon the nation as a whole.

The concepts of genetics during the Society's early years were less sophisticated than they later became subsequent to the rediscovery and acceptance within the



Figure 1. CMAC: SA/EUG/J.18. Design used during the 1930s on the cover of leaflets about the Society and explaining the meaning of Eugenics. The implicit message is one of positive eugenics: these healthy parents have more than replaced themselves with equally healthy offspring and represent the desirable outcome of a eugenic programme. (Photo: Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

scientific community of Gregor Mendel's work on the mechanisms of heredity. Many traits and diseases were believed to be hereditary which are now either known to be the result of infection (for example, tuberculosis) or multifactorial in their causation. Moral qualities good and bad as well as scientific and artistic ability were treated as if they were simple attributes like eye or hair colour transmitted by uncomplicated models of inheritance. The Society compiled pedigree charts to illustrate this for educational and propaganda purposes (see plates 1 and 3).

From 1932 under the direction of C. P. Blacker as General Secretary (see plate 4), the Society became committed to a "reform" eugenics programme, which was not altogether popular with all sections of the membership. This new eugenics rejected the old naïve "mainline" eugenics: the more sophisticated genetic science of the 1930s no longer saw questions of inheritance as so simple or so easy to deal with as they had seemed around 1910, given the increased understanding of dominant and recessive hereditary characteristics and the distribution of the latter in dormant form throughout a "normal" population, only to be expressed in certain circumstances. The old eugenics had also fallen under severe suspicion as a mere pseudo-scientific mask for class and race prejudice.² Throughout the 1930s Blacker was anxious to dissociate the British eugenics movement from the excesses of Nazi Germany and the enforced sterilization programmes of some parts of the USA, whilst endeavouring to widen the Society's basis of support.

By removing financial anxiety from the Society, the Twitchin bequest meant that it could pursue its aims with vigour, and during the 1930s the Society promoted them over a wide front. It lobbied Parliament for the legalization of voluntary sterilization (the state of the law was such that it was unclear whether a doctor could legally sterilize even a consenting patient in order to preserve life). Research was funded into the development of a cheap, safe, and easy to use contraceptive. Propaganda activities were stepped up, with lectures, stands at Health Exhibitions (see plate 3), and the production of an educational film on the subject of heredity. Groups were established through Eugenics Society initiative, such as the Population Investigation Committee to study the wider issues of demography (there was anxiety in the 1930s about the absolute decline of the population of Britain and not just its quality).

Eugenics as a concept was seriously discredited as a result of the revelations about the Nazi regime in Germany. Nevertheless, the membership of the Society dwindled slowly during the 1940s and 1950s rather than falling away suddenly, although it never regained the support it had enjoyed in the early 1930s. Recruitment drives had little success and the Society seemed to be losing a sense of direction. In 1963 the Society sought and was granted charitable status, which meant that it had to give up propagandist activities; these had anyway been on the wane since the peak years before the war. The Society became less popular in its appeal and more scientifically orientated, seeking to establish common ground between the biological and social sciences and to promote the study of the interaction of biological and social factors. From 1964 Annual Symposia have been held with this aim. Publication of the *Eugenics*

² This concept of "old" and "reform" eugenics is adumbrated by D. Kevles in his work *In the name of eugenics*.

Review ceased in 1968. In 1969 the Society launched a new journal, *The Journal of Biosocial Science*. Around the same time the Society set up the Galton Foundation to promote and support the biosocial sciences. In 1988 the Society moved from Eccleston Square to smaller premises and changed its name to the Galton Institute.

The archives of the Society held in the CMAC on the whole go up only to the 1960s. Some indication of their content has already been given. In format they are very diverse; minutes (including those of committees set up for particular short-term purposes); annual reports and other publications (and some publications from other bodies); correspondence with individuals, organizations, and on specific subjects of interest to the Society, also with eugenic societies world-wide; family trees and pedigrees (see plates 1 and 3); posters and wall-charts, and other publicity materials (see fig. 1 and plate 2); report-forms submitted by lecturers, also describing the response to the Society's stands at exhibitions; photographs (see plates 3 and 4); magic-lantern slides; press-cuttings; some financial records; versions of the educational film *From Generation to Generation/Hereditry in Man*³ made during the 1930s; and some tape-recordings. Because Marie Stopes, the pioneer birth-controller, left her clinic (as well as parts of her library, and the copyrights of certain of her works) to the Eugenics Society, there is a small collection of her papers, which, it may be deduced, were found on the Mothers' Clinic premises, among those of the Society.⁴ The records of the running of the clinic after Stopes's death are also to be found here up to 1978, when the premises were disposed of. It is hoped that, as other records of the Society become non-current, there will be further accruals to this important archive. It is further hoped to make microfilm copies of the volumes of Council minutes still retained by the Society (in accordance with its Articles of Association) so that they may be consulted in conjunction with the rest of the CMAC collection. Certain heavily used sections of the collection have been microfilmed for conservation purposes because of the somewhat frail nature of the paper: in order to prevent wear and tear, readers may be required to use the microfiche rather than the originals and to have reader-printer copies rather than xeroxes if reprography is required.

There is a 57-page handlist to the collection, revised in 1988 to incorporate the additional accession received in that year. This list may be consulted at the Library Desk of the Wellcome Institute; xerox copies can be supplied at standard WIHM charges. The previous version of the list was published in microform by Chadwyck Healey Associates but this is, of course, now out of date. The current list is also available at the National Register of Archives. The collection may be consulted by *bona fide* researchers who have obtained the prior permission of the General Secretary, Galton Institute, 19 Northfields Prospect, Northfields, London SW18 1DE, by appointment with the Archivist, after signing the usual Reader's Application and Undertaking Form.

³ It may be viewed by prior arrangement with the Archivist. There are plans to make a video recording from it.

⁴ The bulk of her papers are held in the British Library, Department of Manuscripts, and a considerable residue, including most of the correspondence she received from the general public, is in the CMAC: ref PP/MCS.

The Eugenics Society archives

Further Reading: A Select List

Items marked * include research based on material from the archives now in the CMAC.

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* Kevles, Daniel J., *In the name of eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

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* Soloway, R. A., *Birth control and the population question in England 1877–1930*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1981.