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# The Eugenics Society of Victoria (1936-1961)

**N**UMEROUS ORGANIZATIONS WHICH aim at promoting human welfare have been thrown up by democracy from time to time. Some have had a brief existence, some have become firmly established as permanent institutions in our society, and some occupy a borderline position which means that their survival and their dissolution and subsequent revival are determined by fluctuations in popular interest and support. It would seem that eugenics belongs to the last class.

## Inauguration

In Melbourne, on October 5th 1936, a large and representative meeting was held under the chairmanship of Professor W. E. Agar, F.R.S., of the Biology Department, University of Melbourne. The prominent social workers who convened the meeting hoped to form a racial hygiene association which would undertake activities on many fronts. The people who attended the meeting were interested in various aspects of education and social welfare, particularly in sex education, the prevention and eradication of venereal disease, the formation of family planning clinics and the dissemination of knowledge concerning eugenics.

The several problems which it was proposed to tackle were discussed briefly. It was pointed out by several speakers that good work in some of the fields mentioned was already being done. Professor Agar, while admitting that it was necessary to pay due attention to all the subjects on the agenda, said that it was doubtful whether it was advisable to combine in one organization all the aims suggested by the convenors. He emphasized the fact that education in eugenics is a special subject by itself.

At a meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall on

October 29th 1936, The Eugenics Society of Victoria was born. Professor W. E. Agar, a distinguished authority on genetics, was elected President. There were many willing workers. We were full of enthusiasm and high hopes as the membership increased. We organized public lectures and distributed a folder which set out our objectives. The first three paragraphs of this are worth quoting, because they show the manner of our approach to the public.

The Science of Eugenics has for its object the maintenance or improvement of the quality of the human race, so far as this depends upon innate inherited factors. This will be achieved if the future generations are produced mainly by persons likely to transmit good qualities of mind and body. The general aim of Eugenics Societies is therefore to bring about a state of affairs where persons of superior natural endowments shall have a higher, or at least not lower, birth rate than persons of inferior endowments; and to ensure that persons with gross defects of mind or body, known to show a tendency to be inherited, should be discouraged or prevented from producing children.

The quality of a human being is compounded of two factors—the potentialities of development of mind and body present in the fertilized ovum from which he arose, and the environment in which those potentialities had to manifest themselves. One of the first tasks of Eugenics is therefore the study of the relative influence of heredity and environment in determining the differences between human beings in regard to traits of personal and social value. Any judgment on the relative fitness of persons for parentage must be based on such knowledge; for inferiority due merely to unfavourable environment can be removed by altering the environment. This is not the direct task of a Eugenics Society, but of other bodies concerned with Public Welfare. The direct concern of Eugenics is with the other ingredient of human quality, the potentialities of development possessed by the fertilized ovum, which are inherited directly

from the parents, or through them from more remote ancestors.

Already there exists a great volume of knowledge on this matter which it will be one of the tasks of the Eugenics Society to study and bring before the public. This knowledge is, however, only of value as a basis for action, and ultimately the aim of Eugenics is to use this knowledge to improve, or at least save from deterioration, the innate inheritable quality of the race.

### Early Activities

Typical titles of the public lectures given are the following: The Aim and Scope of Eugenics, The Principles of Heredity, Mental Deficiency and Insanity, Birth Control and Eugenics, The Eugenic Outlook for the Future, The Relative Influence of Heredity and Environment, The Social Problem Group, Sterilization of the Unfit, The Psychological Clinic and Mental Deficiency, Eugenics and the Future of the Australian Population, The Prevention of Mental Disorder, Social Efficiency and Levels of Intelligence, The Production of Superior Races, and a great variety of other subjects.

Wherever possible lantern slides were used to illustrate the lectures. The speakers were usually professors or senior lecturers from the University of Melbourne, consultant psychiatrists or people who had a special knowledge of anthropology or other subjects associated in some way with eugenics. The lectures were carefully prepared and always provoked numerous questions. I was Honorary Secretary of the society from 1936 to 1961. I regret now that I did not try to obtain from each lecturer a copy of his notes or even an article for publication. All I have which relates to the substance of the lectures is an album of newspaper cuttings. Due notice of the lectures was given to the editors of our daily newspapers and what was said at the lectures was very well reported.

Our Society published two informative pamphlets, which were widely distributed: *Eugenics and the Future of the Australian Population* by Professor W. E. Agar; and *Voluntary Sterilization for Human Betterment* by Mrs. Angela Booth.

In 1939, when the Mental Hygiene Bill was about to be introduced in the State Parliament our Society requested that it include provision to make sterilization legal when it was volunteered

by persons suffering from mental deficiency and mental disorders due to hereditary causes. Our request was refused by the Chief Secretary, who stated that "the records of the Department of Mental Hygiene did not contain a single instance of any person having sought permission to undergo the treatment." This reply might seem effective, but to us it was just another example of the urgent need for more education in preventive medicine.

We were greatly encouraged in our work when we received from the Eugenics Society (England) a generous donation as well as a consignment of books with which to found a library. We derived inspiration from THE EUGENICS REVIEW which was a major factor in the strengthening of our Society, membership of which included receipt of this journal. We felt that we were now firmly established especially as we had, as members of our Society, prominent judges, senior University professors and other highly respected citizens.

### Birth Control and Australian Opinion

A burst of publicity resulted from an offer by one member of our Society to give £100 towards the cost of establishing a birth control clinic in one of the poorer suburbs of Melbourne. Immediately the Roman Catholic Archbishop made an emphatic public protest. He declared that it was a blot on Australia that the population was not increasing more rapidly. Sir John Harris said "As Minister for Health I heartily disapprove this proposal. I am totally against it." One newspaper challenged us to define clearly what we meant by "the unfit" and "persons of inferior endowments." Who were we that we should presume to be the judges? It attacked the proposal to establish a birth control clinic and stated that "the most urgent problem that confronts the world to-day is not how to prevent births, but how to prevent poverty."

The stir created by the proposal must have been news overseas. Before the tumult had subsided we received from Dr. Marie Stopes a liberal donation towards the cost of establishing the clinic.

Numerous letters were written to the editors of newspapers. Most of them condemned the proposal to establish a clinic. To understand this reaction it is necessary to realize that Australia

is the one remaining continent which is definitely under-populated. It is stated that we need a greatly increased population for the successful defence of Australia, for the development of our various industries, primary, secondary and tertiary, for the acceleration of our cultural progress and to promote our general advancement and thus increase our influence for peace and goodwill in the world. Of course, there are some people who maintain that these aims will not be achieved by a mere increase in numbers, but that quality is more important than quantity. Nevertheless, over a long period of time, successive Australian governments have made great efforts to attract to this country immigrants from Great Britain and the continent of Europe. "Populate or perish" is the political slogan. Any activity which would cause a diminution of the natural rate of increase is therefore publicly condemned. The birth control clinic was not established, not because we were intimidated in any way by public protests, but because instruction in contraception was not one of the objectives of our Society. It would not have been practicable to run a public clinic at which such instruction would be confined to "eugenic" cases only.

### **Positive and Negative Eugenics**

So many people in Australia take an interest in the breeding of sheep, horses and other domesticated animals that they quite naturally think of improving the quality of the human species. Most people readily agree with the principle that it is desirable that future generations should be produced by persons likely to transmit good qualities of mind and body. Difficulties arise when the methods of accomplishing this objective are discussed. In our public lectures we had little trouble over negative eugenics, the prevention of the birth of undesirable progeny such as mentally defective children who become a burden on the State. We found it more difficult to outline a social policy which would promote positive eugenics. It was not easy to convince people that it should be possible to increase greatly the proportion of offspring who will have desirable qualities of mind and body. "You cannot bribe people of superior mental endowment into having more children because so many complex social factors are involved," we were

told. However, we were glad to meet with active opposition, which is better than apathy because it stimulates frank discussion, and this serves the cause of truth.

### **The Second World War and its Aftermath**

The Eugenics Society of Victoria was full of vitality until the start of the second world war. The links between Australia and Great Britain are very strong. When the Mother Country is at war we are at war. People could not be bothered with what they regarded as academic questions concerning the future improvement of the race. They became deeply concerned about defending the British way of life. They thought of immediate threats to survival and not of future possibilities of racial deterioration. Attendance at public lectures dropped off very greatly. The impact of the war affected our Society to an increasing degree, and we decided not to hold any more public lectures.

Despite the activity of German submarines during the war every issue of THE EUGENICS REVIEW reached us safely. As time went by the REVIEW became the most important factor in the life of our little Society. Spare copies were sent to the Biology School of the University of Melbourne, where they were distributed among the lecturers.

At the Annual General Meeting of our Society, held in 1947, Dr. K. S. Cunningham, Director of the Australian Council of Educational Research, was elected President. This resulted in many new contacts being made, but we did not organize any more public lectures. We thought it would be a good plan to work through organizations which were already well established, rather than rent a hall and try to attract an audience ourselves.

### **The Importance of Youth**

Any Eugenics Society should set out to appeal to youth, to attain its objectives by teaching the youth of the nation, and to have as many young members as possible. When our organization was formed we did not have sufficient foresight to concentrate on youth. Looking back over past years one realizes that a Eugenics Society should be something more than just another learned society.

In the State of Victoria Medical Officers give

lectures in the School Teachers' Colleges. The syllabus of lectures shows that there are opportunities for teaching the principles of eugenics to young people. Pre-Engagement Counselling, Preparation for Parenthood and Marriage Counselling are included in the list. If something of what the teachers are taught gets through to the senior boys and girls, then definite progress would be made in a field where a knowledge of eugenics would be most effective.

If we had our time over again we would probably explore diligently all the possibilities of imparting to young people a knowledge of eugenics. Biology is taught in many schools and colleges. What a wonderful opportunity to teach the older boys and girls the principles of heredity and their practical application for the purpose of improving the inborn qualities of the race!

### Conclusions and Results

It is difficult to assess the exact influence of any particular group on the life of a community. The Eugenics Society of Victoria did have an impact upon public opinion. In certain respects we were pioneers in this country and the subjects which we presented to the public stimulated discussion and aroused controversy. We helped to prepare the way for other groups which were formed subsequently.

During recent years public lectures on human reproduction have been given. Marriage counselling has become firmly established and is now assisted by the Commonwealth Government. A family planning clinic has been opened unobtrusively. The climate of public opinion has changed and attitudes to certain social policies are not as rigid as formerly. The pioneers played a definite part in winning this freedom and in bringing about this enlightenment.

As we did not wish to make our Society exclusive we kept our annual subscription low. It remained at ten shillings from the day it was formed until it was finally dissolved twenty-five years later. The circular relating to "increase of subscription," sent out to all members of The

Eugenics Society (England) in August 1960 meant that, if we were to continue, our new annual subscription would have to be £2. 12. 6, Australian currency. We were later invited by the General Secretary "to join the Society here as individuals." It was obvious that the Eugenics Society of Victoria would not have a separate existence much longer, especially with our reduced membership.

As it was a matter which concerned every member a postal vote concerning our future was taken early in 1961, after an explanatory letter had been sent out. No decision was made until a reply had been received from every member. There were many declarations of regret and the hope was expressed that our Society might be rejuvenated. Finally, however, it was decided to donate what money we had (equivalent to £145 sterling) to The Eugenics Society (England) because of the most generous help they gave us when we were very young, because our subscription of ten shillings never did pay for THE EUGENICS REVIEW which we received for so many years, and because we were certain that the money would be spent in accordance with the aims and objects of our own Society. It was decided to donate our collection of books to Monash University, a new centre of learning which is now building up its own library.

But that is not the end of the story. Imagine our surprise and our feelings of gratitude when we were informed by Dr. G. C. L. Bertram, the General Secretary in the United Kingdom, that the Finance Committee had decided that the money which we sent as a donation would be regarded as being held on trust. We have been assured that, in the event of a successor society being formed in Australia, there is a sum of money in England available to be drawn upon as a help in its early growth. That is an excellent arrangement, and is deeply appreciated by us. I would like to take this opportunity of letting posterity know that financial help and kindly guidance awaits some future Eugenics Society of Australia.