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## Eugenics wasn't always a dirty word

A Scottish bioethicist recalls famous Scots who wanted to create a better humanity.  
Calum MacKellar | 19 August 2014



In the minds of many, eugenic policies -- strategies aimed at positively influencing the genetic heritage of a community -- will always be associated with the abuses of Nazi Germany. What is little known, however, was the influence of Scottish thinkers who backed such policies during the 19th and 20th centuries. Their collective support has recently been revealed in a new book entitled *The Ethics of the New Eugenics* published on behalf of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics.

Eugenics, as a specific discipline emerged during the 1860s with Englishman, Francis Galton who was greatly influenced by his cousin Charles Darwin, arguing that since many human societies sought to protect the sick and the weak, they were contravening natural selection. Indeed, because of the development of medical care and other social policies, the weakest individuals were now surviving well into a reproductive age which enabled them to pass on their dysfunctions to their children. Galton indicated that only through eugenic programs could society be saved from a genetic degeneration towards mediocrity.

Probably the best known Scotsman who supported eugenics at the time was Alexander Graham Bell, famous as one of the inventors of the telephone. In 1883, and like many other early eugenicists, he proposed controlling immigration for eugenic purposes in order to make sure that

only certain genetically healthy persons would be welcomed into a country. Bell became the Honorary President of the Second International Congress on Eugenics in 1921.

At about the same time, the scientist Marie Stopes, who was born in Edinburgh and opened the UK's first family planning clinic, defended the fight for contraception out of eugenic motives - amongst other reasons. She wrote in 1920 that she "would like to see the sterilization of those totally unfit for parenthood made an immediate possibility, indeed made compulsory". Adding that when a responsible government passed legislation for mandatory sterilizations: 'Then at last we will begin to see the elimination of the horror and degradation of humanity, which, at present, is apparently so hopeless and permanent a blot upon the world... The evolution of humanity will take a leap forward when we have around us only fine and beautiful young people...'

What is surprising is the extent to which eugenic policies were accepted by even the most respectable individuals at the time, such as previous Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Scotsman, Arthur Balfour, who gave the opening speech at the First International Congress on Eugenics in 1912.

Indeed, it was partly because of the support for such eugenic ideology, in both Europe and North America, that the Nazi party began to consider eugenic programs as soon as it assumed power in Germany in 1933. It sought to protect a 'pure' race through eugenic policies which encouraged 'racial hygiene'. As a result, the sterilisation of up to 350,000 Germans, whom the Nazis viewed as mentally and physically 'unfit', took place.

Another incarnation of the eugenic ideology was the euthanasia program for those deemed severely disabled and incurable. Overall, the program oversaw the euthanasia of some 27,000 German patients especially in psychiatric institutions.

But even after the horrors of the Second World War, eugenic ideology did not disappear. As late as 1963, the Anglo-Scottish professor of genetics at University College London J.B.S. Haldane indicated that as soon as the science of genetics is better understood large-scale eugenic programmes would become possible adding that "... we may expect a drastic reduction in the frequency of undesired abnormalities with simple genetical determination by the end of this [20th] century."

To create desirable persons, he suggested inseminating women with the sperm of men, judged to be physically and intellectually superior. Moreover, in an interesting early premonition of things to come, he stressed that "There is, however, another possibility which I at least take seriously. ... The production of a clone from cells of persons of attested ability ... [which] might raise the possibilities of human achievement dramatically.

With the relentless development of modern genetic selection and with the horrors of the Second World War slowly becoming more distant, will a return to a new eugenics, in another guise, ever be possible in modern society?

The physician, Leo Alexander, one of the leading medical examiners at the post Second World War Nuremberg Medical Trials, underscored the importance of appreciating historical context, as he reflected on the events of early 20th century Germany:

*"Whatever proportions these crimes finally assumed, it became evident to all who investigated them that they had started from small beginnings. The beginnings at first were merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitudes of the physicians. It started with the acceptance of the attitude, basic to the euthanasia movement, that there is such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived. This attitude in its early stages concerned itself merely with the severely and chronically sick. Gradually the sphere of those to be included in this category was enlarged to encompass the socially unproductive, the ideologically unwanted, the racially unwanted and finally all non-Germans."*

Looking at the state of 1949 American medicine and the manner in which it considered very sick incurable patients, Alexander then warned:

*"In an increasingly utilitarian society these patients are being looked down upon with increasing definiteness as unwanted ballast. A certain amount of rather open contempt for the people who cannot be rehabilitated with present knowledge has developed. This is probably due to a good deal of unconscious hostility, because these people for whom there seem to be no effective remedies, have become a threat to newly acquired delusions of omnipotence."*

In his conclusion, Alexander warned that there was a certain logical sequence to the disappearance of civilized behaviour. This begins by recognizing the pragmatic use of scientific developments; it then continues by discarding traditional values of human dignity in disdainful arrogance of what can be achieved but it always ends in a moral and ethical wasteland.

Democratic societies, therefore, need to remain vigilant since the past respectability of making sure only certain kinds of children are brought into existence is already making a return. The law, as a result, should re-emphasise the crucial importance of the principle of equality in value and worth of every human being implicitly rejecting the risks associate to what has been termed a 'sorting society'.

A compassionate society should also learn to accept all possible future children in an environment which reflects its unconditional and equal acceptance of the suffering as well as the happy child. It will then continue to uphold and protect the important inherent equal dignity and value of all human beings – accepting them for who they are and suffering or rejoicing with them in compassion and care.

Wisdom demands a sense of genuine humility and a refusal to accept the notions that 'It cannot happen here,' 'It cannot happen again' or 'It cannot happen to us.' Society cannot rest in the deceptive safety of the present while believing that it is free from the abuses of the past.

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