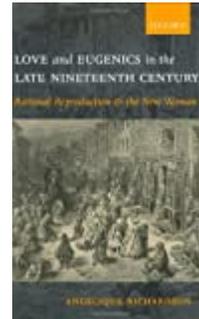




**Angelique Richardson.** *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xvii + 250 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-818700-4.



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## Reading and Reproduction

Eugenic thought came to its fullest fruition in Nazi Germany. It has thus become inseparable from the concept of racial hygiene and from the Holocaust. But eugenics has a longer history that began in Victorian Britain. Eugenics was espoused not only by right-wing racists but by socialists, and as Angelique Richardson argues, by early feminists. *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* argues that eugenics was supported and advanced in England by a group of early feminist writers who used rational reproduction to redefine the nature of women's civic participation and thus the meaning of citizenship.

Eugenics, the science of selective human breeding, was developed in the 1860s by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's first cousin. Inspired by Malthusianism, Darwinism, and more particularly Social Darwinism, eugenics sought to combat "race deterioration" and improve national efficiency by encouraging the best stock to reproduce, while at the same time discouraging the profligate procreation of the poverty-stricken "residuum." Richardson argues that eugenics in Britain was thus a discourse primarily about class that emerged in the context

of vibrant debates over urban poverty. Eugenicians theorized that poverty was the product of biology and was thus immune to environmental changes. They argued that social reform could not alter the essential nature of the poor, and thus that both philanthropic ventures and state interventions, even the draconian New Poor Law, were an impediment to the progress of the nation. Intervening to ameliorate the conditions of the poor, eugenicians argued, only perpetuated their existence and encouraged their reproduction. Letting nature take its course, they insisted, would ensure "the survival of the fittest" and thus the eventual decline of those least able to compete in the modern world.

Unlike Germany and the United States, Britain did not pass eugenic laws that controlled the reproduction of those whom "experts" deemed unfit. The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, which allowed for the detention and segregation of the "feeble-minded," was the only piece of legislation promoted by eugenicians that was introduced in Britain. However, eugenics was widely debated in the last decades of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, not just by scientists and politicians

but at dinner tables, at public meetings, in newspapers, and, crucially, in fiction. Richardson argues in fact that “the most sustained expressions of eugenic thought were to be found in fiction,” (p. xii) and more specifically in a body of early feminist fiction produced by a group of female authors collectively known as “New Woman” writers. Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird all engaged with and promoted public debate on eugenics through novels, short stories, and essays that explored the changing role of women in relationship to poverty, sickness, and the health of the nation and the empire.

Eugenics was a fruitful field for women writers because it hinged on reproduction. In Victorian culture, reproduction was imagined to be women’s highest duty. To be a wife was important, but motherhood was widely regarded by the middle class as women’s key contribution to society. Eugenic feminists cautioned women to be scrupulous about choosing a mate, to select a man based on his health, lifestyle, and ability to father “well-born” children, and to steer clear of those who came from “bad stock” or who had been exposed to syphilis or other degenerative diseases. Since it was nature rather than nurture that would determine the future health of individuals and thus the nation as a whole, feminist eugenics focused attention not just on women’s role in child-rearing but in the reproduction of healthy offspring and thus encouraged women to be actively involved in choosing a good mate. Eugenic feminists argued that, even if sexual difference was biologically determined and dictated gender roles, women could participate in the process of evolution by engaging in selective breeding practices. If degeneration was caused by men’s passions and impulses, the job of regeneration, eugenic feminists insisted, fell to women.

Fiction became an important vehicle for the promotion of eugenic feminism because “New Woman” writers believed that the female novel was itself transformative and could effect moral and social change. Fiction could function as an antidote to the dangerous conventional romance that privileged sentiment and passion over the rational selection of a mate. Fiction, these female authors argued, could educate young women about the dangers of the degenerate male, promote the choice of a suitable partner, and become a tool for forging a new breed of female citizens. But as Richardson notes, eugenic feminist writers were also constrained by the need to entertain their readership. A novel requires character development in order to sustain the interest of readers. Eugenic theory, however, maintained that people were biologically programmed and did not change precisely be-

cause they were victims of their hereditary makeup. The role of fiction as educational and medicinal, Richardson demonstrates, was thus constantly in tension with its formal conventions.

Richardson’s readings of Grand, Egerton, and Caird reveal that “New Woman” writers were deeply committed to the debate over eugenics, but that they occupied rather different positions. Both Grand and Egerton promoted rational reproduction, insisting women’s claims to citizenship rested on a kind of civic participation that was not about political participation or military service, but rather about their role as the bearers of future citizens. Both challenged conventional morality by championing the production of healthy children above the sanctity of the marriage relation. “New Woman” writers questioned middle-class morality’s condemnation of illegitimacy and promotion of both female chastity and monogamy, arguing instead that the production of the “well-born” was more important than the maintenance of traditional sexual morality which rested on the patriarchal double standard.

Significantly, Caird challenged the assumptions of Grand and Egerton, arguing instead that individuals could change, were not determined by their biology, and thus that motherhood was not the natural function of women. She critiqued both pronatalism and negative eugenic practices aimed at weeding out the unfit, championing instead the rights and liberties of individuals. By focusing on the role of the environment, rather than on biology, Caird dismissed the idea that the poor were inherently unfit to reproduce and argued instead for the possibility of intervening to ameliorate social conditions. For Caird, “motherhood and the idea of race, twin strategies of the imperial plan, are instruments of oppression which act on and through the flesh” (pp. 212-213). Richardson’s analysis of Caird provides a fascinating counterpoint to her readings of Grand and Egerton, revealing that not all early feminist authors who engaged in the nature-nurture debate were eugenicists, but rather that eugenics became a flashpoint for feminist discussions over modern women’s place within the public sphere.

Richardson successfully demonstrates that gender and class politics were part and parcel of imperial politics, but strangely makes only passing reference in a footnote to the Boer War and the Physical Deterioration Committee report that followed it in 1904. These are generally considered to be key events in the history of Britain’s engagement in imperial debates over the role of biological

and environmental factors in “race deterioration.” But Richardson does not explore the ways in which any of these authors reacted to either the war itself or to the decidedly anti-eugenic report that followed it, which concluded that the social conditions of urban slums were to blame for the poor physical state and performance of the predominantly working-class troops.

Similarly, while Richardson is right to focus on the politics of class and to cast eugenics as intimately related to the problems of urban poverty, race seems curiously absent from this study. Richardson rightly argues that race was a slippery concept in the late nineteenth century that was deeply bound up in class ideologies. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth-century racial difference was central to the production of British national and imperial identities and thus must have played an important role in eugenic thought. There is little engagement here with how eugenic feminists constructed themselves not only as middle-class, but as white, and the importance of racial purity to the maintenance of empire. Many of these women had colonial experiences in Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Malta, Egypt, Ceylon, had traveled in China, Japan, and South America, and had been mar-

ried to men who had spent considerable time in India and Canada. Their experiences were thus shaped not merely by the politics of the British class system, but by a variety of different imperial locations and articulations of whiteness. I am curious to know how “New Woman” writers participated in eugenic debate in a wider imperial context, and how they understood their roles as reproducers of a superior race of white as well as middle-class future citizens.

My desire for Richardson to engage more directly with race stems from my eagerness as a historian to move beyond the novel in particular and learn more about the wider relationship between feminism and eugenics in order to unpack the complex interconnections between class, gender, and racial ideologies in turn-of-the-century Britain. However, I recognize that this is not the intention of *Love and Eugenics*, which is a very well-written and thoughtful piece of scholarship that successfully combines historical analysis and literary criticism. It is a welcome and important contribution to the cultural study of British eugenics and early feminism and, crucially, to the relationship between the two.

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