

As she travels around the region, Farnham describes nature's glorious abundance as well as its destructive power; she ruminates on "the fraudulent precipitancy" with which settlers have sealed the fate of the area's Native Americans; and she explains her understanding of the reciprocity between the land and the people (p. 226). Death is a frequent presence in Farnham's account; during a two-week period in the summer of 1838, Farnham lost her sister and first-born child. Few accounts of children's deaths in nineteenth-century sources are rendered with as much emotional intensity. Elsewhere a father, absent to buy provisions, returns to find his home burned; encountering "perishing children, an infant corpse, a dying wife," he can only "curse . . . the

treacherous beauty that invited him there" (p. 184).

Despite such vivid glimpses of the harsh realities of prairie life, Farnham leaves little doubt about what she considers to be nature's ultimate "plan": prairie settlement, she proclaims, will reveal how "great, and good, and strong, is man when left to govern himself; free from want, from oppression, from ignorance, from fear!" (p. 268).

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*War Against the Weak
Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*
By Edwin Black

(New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003. Pp. xviii, 550. Illustrations, notes, major sources, index. \$27.00.)

The rise of the pseudoscience of eugenics and the sociopolitical use of its unproven theories form one of the darkest chapters in medical history. Edwin Black extensively reviews archival materials to document the connections between eugenics in the United States and the work of the German Nazis. He argues that flawed American research in the first three decades of the twentieth century provided an apparently rational cover for Hitler's deranged plans, and explores,

in the last two chapters, how the findings of modern genetics might well be misused today.

Eugenics in America combined a distortion of nineteenth-century scientific discoveries with the misinterpretation of sociological trends at the turn of the twentieth century. Darwin's theories opened new vistas on the natural world, biomedical and psychological research advanced, and Mendel's work defining inheritance of simple traits in plants was redis-

covered after fifty years. For many Progressive Era scientists and social theorists, the possibility for human improvement seemed limitless.

Francis Galton, a cousin of Darwin who was interested in animal breeding and in statistical measurement of human populations, invented the term eugenics. He combined Darwinian natural selection and the concept of inherited traits to promote the idea of positive eugenics, with the implication that his own advantaged class should intermarry and produce superior progeny to improve the human race. Galton did note, however, that eugenics was not yet scientifically provable.

Many Americans distorted Galton's views into a negative eugenics that promulgated prevention of reproduction by the so-called inferior classes: the poor, the severely mentally ill, the intellectually disadvantaged, convicts, and recent immigrants not of the "Nordic race," i.e., the weak and powerless. Tragically, many respected American physicians, scientists, academics, and philanthropists bought into this notion. In order to document the connection between Germany in the 1930s and American eugenicists, Black focuses on these eugenicists rather than on those who opposed them.

Indiana contributed its share of this group. Dr. Harry Clay Sharp began performing extralegal medical castration of males at the Jeffersonville Reformatory in the late 1890s as a cure for excessive masturbation. He later accepted ideas appearing in the

medical literature at the time that vasectomy of convicts would prevent the propagation of a criminal class, and he became the world expert in the three-minute procedure, which used no anesthesia. Reverend Oscar McCulloch, a leading reformer and advocate of public charity from Indianapolis, twisted sociological studies calling for social reform into a fervid belief in hereditary determinism uninfluenced by environmental factors. He performed genealogical investigation of a "degenerate" family, the Tribe of Ishmael, though his conclusions have not been substantiated by re-examination of his pseudoscientific data. Former Indiana University President David Starr Jordan became the United States' leading eugenic theorist with the publication of *Blood of a Nation* (1902), which Black quotes as arguing, "The pauper is the victim of heredity, but neither Nature nor Society recognizes that as an excuse for his existence." Dr. J. N. Hurty, secretary of the Indiana State Board of Health and later president of the American Public Health Association, lobbied the Indiana legislature to pass a law legalizing involuntary sterilization. His attempts repeatedly failed until 1907 when Sharp pressured Governor J. Frank Hanly, and the legislature finally passed the law making Indiana the first jurisdiction in the world to legislate involuntary sterilization of mentally impaired patients, poorhouse residents, and prisoners.

Although much has been written about involuntary sterilization in

America, Edwin Black's investigation into the background of eugenics and the people who vigorously promoted it is among the most thoroughly researched studies to date. His presentation is balanced; the story it tells is fascinating—and frightening.

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Blue-Collar Hollywood

Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film

By John Bodnar

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Pp. xxxiv, 284. Illustrations, notes, sources, index. \$42.95.)

For nearly a century, working people—ordinary men and women—have been frequent subjects in one of the most powerful forms of mass culture: the American film. In *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, historian John Bodnar presents an important investigation and critique of characterizations of working people in “the movies,” and of the way in which film-making interacts with American political and social traditions.

Bodnar brings his understanding of political, social, and cinematic history to bear on a number of significant films, arranged by era from the 1930s to the 1990s, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Pride of the Marines*, *A Street Car Named Desire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Raging Bull*, and *Norma Rae*. As intriguing as the author's investigation into the characters populating the movies themselves is his history of the development of American political culture over sixty years, and of how that culture, in turn, shaped the nature of the film industry and its

product. Bodnar demonstrates a superb grasp of relevant political theory as well as current historiography to underpin his analysis of the movies. His interpretation of the role of the family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, includes a presentation of the essential film narrative and analysis of character roles, a sense of the production issues and decisions that affected the resulting film, an examination of the political and social cultures of the era and their relationships with the film, a review of public and governmental engagement with the film, and finally, his analysis of the interplay among these variables.

The main theoretical thrust of Bodnar's book lies in his interest in the relationship between Hollywood's portrayal of working people and the power of two principal (and often competing) American political traditions: liberalism and democracy. As such, the work addresses a wide range of social and political issues, such as