

Popular Eugenics

National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s

By Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell

(Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 406. Illustrations, index. Clothbound, \$69.95; paperbound, \$28.95.)

Indiana's 1907 enactment of the first eugenic sterilization law in the world has been discussed recently in the pages of the *IMH*, but readers may want to know more about what came after that first step. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell's *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* offers an interesting look at what happened to the national eugenics movement in the years that followed.

The book's edited contributions cover a wide spectrum of eugenic-influenced movements. Indeed, as Currell and Cogdell explain, the 1930s was a pivotal period in American eugenic thought, as the movement began to grapple with how to widely apply its vision to the country. Should it continue to focus on preventive, or negative eugenics? Or, could the American environment be altered in order to produce a eugenically sound populace? As the various authors show, this debate was far from academic, as by the 1930s the notion of eugenics affected virtually all of American culture and life. Americans were looking at the world around them and debating the problems associated with the Depression in eugenic terms.

The contributors to the volume discuss this dialogue in very different

and interesting ways. From looking at the Cooper Hewitt trial; to examining the meanings that Americans assigned to Franklin Roosevelt's triumph over polio; to a study of the notion that a better educated general populace might create a eugenic utopia; to a look at the effects that eugenic thought had on the South (the book includes three wonderful chapters on this region)—the first section of *Popular Eugenics* offers a varied yet intriguing analysis both of how eugenics was understood and of its complexity as a movement. The second section of the book deals more specifically with the degree to which eugenic thought permeated American visual culture. Readers will be treated to discussions of statuary, the colon as a eugenic device, the eugenic dimensions of teeth (and its relationship to criminality), as well as a look at how Hollywood, both in its horror films and musical comedies, dealt with eugenics. The book ends with a chapter on what became of an exhibit, popular in Nazi Germany, that toured the United States prior to the Second World War, reminding readers of one path that eugenics took.

In short, a variety of readers will find this book to be of use and interest. Currell and Cogdell do a wonderful job of showcasing the

complexity of the eugenic movement during the 1930s. More importantly, they do a service to readers by showing that even as eugenicists endured a widening public critique, they never lost their general sense of racial and class superiority or bias. In many ways, even as the movement changed, it stayed remarkably the same. That eugenics moved so quickly from its Indiana start to its eventual status as a mainstream nationwide movement

is a very unsettling fact that the book's contributors display for all to see.

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Republican Women

Feminism and Conservatism From Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right

By Catherine E. Rymph

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. xi, 339. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95.)

Catherine Rymph has produced a tightly focused monograph on the role of Republican women in shaping the political culture of the party over the course of the twentieth century. Rymph is concerned with describing the moral crusades of GOP clubwomen—women who operated outside the party structure and who concerned themselves with advancing an agenda of female consciousness. She also suitably describes the activism of party women who operated within the party structure and sought to shape its internal policies and platforms.

The book is focused mostly on the tensions between clubwomen and party women in constructing policies, both within and outside the party, that

might maximize benefits for women. Rymph has done a solid job contextualizing the disputes between women's factions and documenting how these disputes, typically over issues of full integration within the wider party, or issues of morality and "women's concerns," fit within the wider GOP landscape.

The book works best in detailing the varied attitudes of clubwomen and party women on a variety of different topics, from suffrage to abortion. Rymph explores the political tumults over control of the National Federation of Republican Women, particularly over the controversial dispute between conservative Phyllis Schlafly, who lost the presidential election of the organization in 1967,