

"A BABY SHOW MEANS WORK IN THE HARDEST SENSE":

The Better Baby Contests of the Vancouver and New Westminster Local Councils of Women, 1913-1929

GERALD E. THOMSON

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SPRING OF 1916 Mrs. Charles Stoddard of the Vancouver Local Council of Women wrote to Mr. Rolston, the manager of the Vancouver Exhibition Association, concerning the fourth annual Better Baby Contest to be held in the fall. She was dissatisfied over the arrangements made for the previous year's contest and hoped that the provisions for the 1916 contest "[would] prove favourable to our committee." Mrs. Stoddard wanted prizes provided for the babies that would "be in line" with the prizes already given at the exhibition for "Horses and Cattle." She reminded Mr. Rolston that "A Baby Show means work in the hardest sense."¹ Since its inception in 1913, the Better Baby Contest had been one of the most popular attractions at the Vancouver Exhibition. By 1916 the *Daily Province* reported that "No feature of the Exhibition aroused so much interest and enthusiasm as this competition."² The Vancouver Council of Women sponsored the Better Baby Contest from 1913 until 1919, when it was abruptly moved to New Westminster. The New Westminster Local Council of Women then held the better baby contests at the Provincial Exhibition of the Royal Agricultural and Industrial (RA&I) Society in Queens Park from 1920 to 1929, when the exhibition buildings were destroyed by fire. Until the 1950s beautiful baby contests could still be found at the Pacific National Exhibition in Vancouver's

¹ Mrs. Charles Stoddard, Correspondence Secretary of the Vancouver Local Council of Women, to Mr. Rolston, Manager of the Vancouver Exhibition Association, 6 April 1916, Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, University of British Columbia (UBC), pp. 1-2.

² "Babyland Has Its Champions No Less Renowned Than Grown-Ups," *Daily Province*, 19 August 1916, 24.

Hastings Park, but they bore little resemblance to the medical clinics of the early twentieth century.

The better baby contests were linked to the emerging eugenics movement in the early part of the twentieth century as well as to the role of women in furthering the supposed quality of the “race.” During this period the term “race” generally referred to people of Anglo-Saxon origin or the peoples of northern Europe, excluding such social outcasts as the Irish. Eugenics in North America grew out of an attack on immigrants arriving from southern Europe, eastern Europe, and Asia. It also fuelled a middle-class distrust of the labouring classes, who seemed to produce an abundance of children. The historian Donald K. Pickens calls North American eugenics a “defensive naturalism for the status quo.” By defensive naturalism Pickens is referring to a protective response by middle-class Anglo-Saxon Americans to their country’s new social landscape as created by immigration. It was a desire to return to a more natural social order, one that they could control. If undesirable immigrants and the labouring classes were allowed to proliferate by excessive breeding while the established Anglo-Saxon middle class experienced a declining birth rate, then there “would be [a] swamping of the social order in a sea of stupidity.”³ “Race suicide” was the irrational fear of the prosperous segments of society in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They believed that their privileged existence was threatened by the overbreeding of socially undesirable people such as immigrants and labourers. This “National Degeneration” became a concern of the British middle and upper classes after the 1870s, when social commentators became preoccupied with the growing number of unfit working-class families. The ranks of the middle and upper classes were not increasing because they had begun to intentionally limit their family size. The poor health of working-class recruits for the Boer War, and social studies by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree (which suggested the national birth rate was dominated by the unfit of the poorer classes) caused eugenic arguments to gain strength.⁴

However, the United States had, since its very beginnings, been concerned with what it regarded as a resident alien population – its very own Black slaves. With immigration in the mid-nineteenth

³ Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), pp. 56 and 67.

⁴ Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 15.

century, American Anglo-Saxons now had to fear such groups as “Latins and Slavs and Jews,” which, “unless kept apart, also might contaminate the strain.” Oscar Handlin has observed that these old fears of race contamination and the new knowledge of evolutionary theory convinced Anglo-Saxon Americans that the “proper conduct of married life was the determining element in the whole future of the race.” Eugenics helped to popularize such concepts as “the quality of the stock” and “a breed fit for the struggle of life.” These notions had previously been confined for the most part to evolutionary speculations concerning animal and species development.⁵ Considering the context of the times, middle-class Anglo-Saxon women and their better baby contests undoubtedly played a central role in furthering the social goals of eugenics for “race” improvement. The purpose of this essay is to see if such was the case with the Vancouver/New Westminster better baby contests of British Columbia from 1913 to 1929.

PART I: THE EUGENIC CREED,
WOMEN'S ROLE IN RACE SUICIDE,
AND THE ADVENT OF BABY CONTESTS

The Eugenic Creed

It was Donald K. Pickens who first identified eugenics as an integral part of the American Progressive Movement, which was seen as distinct from its precursor, Social Darwinism. He called the ideological bond that held the diverse followers of American eugenics together the “eugenic creed.” The creed’s followers believed that it was important that human beings of superior heredity shape modern civilization. The limiting of the socially unfit was necessary, and “the fit were encouraged to increase their numbers.”⁶ Eugenics had come to North America from Great Britain after its invention in 1883 by the cousin of evolutionist Charles Darwin, Francis Galton. The word “eugenics” derives from the Greek word “eugenes,” meaning well-born; hence, Galton described eugenics as the science of the well-born. Galton believed the quality of the human race could be improved by selective breeding, as had the quality of such domestic

⁵ Oscar Handlin, *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), 123-25.

⁶ Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 55.

animals as cattle and horses. To Galton the mandate of eugenics was to further the scientific study of all aspects “that may improve or impair the social qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally.” He described all measures taken to improve the human race through such methods as selective breeding “positive eugenics,” while he described the restriction of reproduction by birth control or surgical procedures “negative eugenics.” It had been the poor physical condition of working-class recruits for the British Army that first alerted Galton to the need for state intervention in human reproduction. The state, he believed, should manage procreation through the issuing of “eugenic certificates” to those judged fit to breed.⁷ The unfit would be restricted from breeding by the deliberate intervention of medical science.

In Great Britain eugenics became a preoccupation of educated middle-class social reformers in their efforts to reform and regulate the poor. In North America eugenics was a response to concerns about the waves of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants that arrived on the continent’s shores in the early twentieth century. The British social critic C.K. Chesterton noted that “round the year 1913 Eugenics was turned from a fad to a fashion.” Although its intellectual roots were in Europe, wrote historians Margaret Winzer and Anne O’Connor, when eugenics crossed the Atlantic it captured the “consciousness of Progressives and social reformers in the United States and Social Gospellers in the Canadian West.”⁸ Eugenics, with its emphasis on the primal importance of heredity, appealed to the threatened Anglo-Saxon middle classes and social reformers of North America. They increasingly saw the preservation of the Anglo-Saxon “race,” along with its “collective means of inheritance,” as the key to maintaining social order and furthering societal improvement. Armed with the scientific theory of “germ plasm,” which concerned the genetic reproduction of human germ cells through the “ids,” or hereditary material (popularized by the German biologist August Weismann in 1893), American eugenicists such as Charles Benedict Davenport began to warn Anglo-Saxon Americans about the danger of “hybridized people.” Race mixing, or crossbreeding, would deplete the national fitness of Anglo-Saxon Americans by introducing the undesirable characteristics of inferior races and their unsuitable

⁷ McLaren, *Master Race*, 15-16.

⁸ Margaret Winzer and Anne O’Connor, “Eugenics: The Threat of the Feeble Minded,” *BC Journal of Special Education* 6, 3 (1982): 217-8.

“hereditary temperament.”⁹ In 1906 several leading academics founded the Committee on Eugenics of the American Breeders Association. Davenport, who was a University of Chicago biologist, later became head of the Eugenic Records Office at Cold Springs Harbour, New York, and the committee’s co-founder, David Jordan Starr, was a renowned ichthyologist as well as president of Stanford University. They were joined in later years by the inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, and biologist Harry H. Laughlin of the Eugenics Records Office. The Eugenics Records Office was a branch of the Carnegie Institute charged with tracing and preserving Anglo-Saxon American genetic lines. It was Laughlin’s 1922 report that convinced the American Congress that many non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants were, in fact, feeble-minded and could not be assimilated. In consequence, the 1924 Immigration Law barred the entry of specific people into the United States based upon their national origin or ethnic abstraction.¹⁰

Terry L. Chapman has documented how the eugenics creed also took hold in western Canada as a response to non-Anglo-Saxon immigration.¹¹ It was evident to Chapman that the “massive immigration experienced by Western Canada prior to 1914” caused “two responses within the same society.” The first involved efforts at overt assimilation and the second involved “segregation and eventually sterilization.” The latter was a “means to ensure that Canada would forever remain white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.” Chapman documents this dichotomy using the opinions expressed by leading Social Gospeller and Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) founder James S. Woodsworth, who gradually converted to the eugenic creed. Woodsworth was an early exponent of immigrant assimilation into Canadian society, as is shown through his work as director of the All People’s Mission in Winnipeg’s North End; however, by 1909 he wrote that certain social groups were “essentially non-assimilable.” They were, he proclaimed, “detrimental to our highest national development and hence should be vigorously excluded.” By 1916 Woodsworth even launched a campaign to establish a school of eugenics in western

⁹ Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 42–43, 57. For August Weismann’s impact on biological theory, see Frederick B. Turnbull, “August Weismann and a Break from Tradition,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 1 (1968): 91–112.

¹⁰ “Editorials: The Pedagogies of Eugenics,” *The American Breeders Magazine* 3 (1912): 222–24; Winzer and O’Connor, “Eugenics,” 219; Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 66.

¹¹ Terry L. Chapman, “Early Eugenics Movement in Western Canada,” *Alberta History* 25, 4 (1977). The quotations in this paragraph are from pages 10 and 13.

Canada, and he openly supported the sterilization of the feeble-minded. Chapman believes Woodsworth's conversion to eugenics was due to "a deep-seated frustration in coping with the complexity of the immigration problem." Woodsworth's position was not unique, as many other reformers began to doubt that social problems could be remedied by environmental improvements alone.

The wider phenomenon of Canada's racist response to non-Anglo-Saxon immigration is dealt with by Angus McLaren in his volume on the history of eugenics in Canada. Although he comes to the conclusion that Canadian eugenicists were not as successful as were their American counterparts at getting Parliament to pass restrictive federal legislation to curb immigration, McLaren believes they were effective at "popularizing biological arguments."¹² A scientific racism came to the "defence of Anglo-Saxon dominance," using such devices as intelligence quotients and medical fitness to openly discriminate against those seen as deviant and unfit. Even youthful Social Gospellers such as Tommy Douglas, future CCF premier of Saskatchewan and father of Canadian medicare, believed in the social promise of eugenics. Douglas's 1933 master's thesis, "The Problems of the Subnormal Family," attested to the popularity of the eugenic creed among social reformers. In the western provinces racism was simply a fact of life. Timothy J. Stanley writes that "Racism in B.C. was not an aberration. It was a sustained reality, part of the air that people breathed." Stanley theorizes that the province's racial hierarchy was constructed on the basis of "Imperial Superiority." Caucasians of British descent regarded all "Orientals" (Chinese, Japanese, East Indians, etc.) and First Nations peoples as lesser human beings. White-only trade unions excluded members "on the basis of race."¹³ In this social environment the eugenic creed provided a scientific rationale for a deeply held racist ideology.

Women's Role in Race Suicide

The eugenic philosophy was attractive to many North American women, especially those involved in various social reform movements. Popularly known as Progressives in the United States and Canada, these reform movements were broadly based in municipal reform

¹² McLaren, *Master Race*, 66-67. The following quotations are from pages 7-9.

¹³ Timothy J. Stanley, "White Supremacy and the Rhetoric of Educational Indoctrination: A Canadian Case Study," in *Children, Teachers, Schools in the History of British Columbia*, ed. Jean Barman, Neil Sutherland, and J. Donald Wilson (Calgary: Detselig, 1995), 51.

groups, poverty advocacy, and labour activism. New political parties, such as the American Urban Progressives and the western farmer parties of Canada, were created to realize specific social reform agendas. Women's groups were highly involved in Progressive politics as they combined their aspiration for political equality and the right to vote with humanitarian social reform. Diane B. Paul writes that "to many activist middle-class women, eugenics seemed a natural part of this wider movement to engage the state in new kinds of social reform. Eugenics' focus on the family and its theme of sacrifice on behalf of large impersonal ends especially resonated with women."¹⁴

Not all women activists were necessarily middle class and urban; for example, the Ladies Auxiliary of the United Farmers Party of Alberta was a major force behind the promotion of eugenics in the 1920s.¹⁵ The eugenicists' appeal to Anglo-Saxon women – an appeal that held that only they could stem the process of race suicide – proved a powerful and seductive argument that succeeded in recruiting these women into the battle to preserve the country's "national fitness." Catherine Arnup believes the race suicide argument combined certain medical concerns over the high infant mortality rate of Anglo-Saxon babies during the early twentieth century in Canada with the high birth rate among non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. Canadian eugenicists were sounding the alarm, arguing that "this meant an overall decrease in the population of British descent." Arnup believes the eugenicists wanted to "elevate the status of motherhood" while, at the same time, castigating individual mothers for not doing their duty to the "race." Canadian eugenicists hoped this "might impel women of the 'better classes' to take up the vocation of motherhood." This was the eugenic response to a falling birth rate among middle-class and upper-class women – a positive eugenics program to increase the number of fit offspring.¹⁶

Jane Ursel describes this fear of race suicide among Canadian Anglo-Saxons as a growing "concern with the declining quantity and quality of the population." A "historically unprecedented consensus" developed around various "pro-natalist policies" that encouraged "English-Canadian women to produce English-Canadian children." This conservative view of a woman's role as manager of the family household

¹⁴ Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 57.

¹⁵ McLaren, *Master Race*, 99-100.

¹⁶ Catherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 21 and 38.

conflicted with the increasing movement of women into the workforce.¹⁷ Jane Lewis theorized that it was this “framework of Darwinistic science and particularly eugenics” that “offered women a positive role as mothers.” A conflict existed between a woman’s perceived primary role in society, that of biological reproduction (which was her “duty to the race”), and the desire of many women to establish financial independence through work or a career.¹⁸ Women couldn’t achieve both because no state support systems (such as daycare) existed at this time. Eugenicians recognized this tension but were adamant about what women had to do. Charles B. Davenport, while supporting the female desire for equality with men, maintained that the need to increase the biological fitness of the race was paramount.¹⁹

Eugenics was thus a highly conservative form of social engineering that sought to maintain not only Anglo-Saxon race dominance, but also the role of women as mothers. Adolf Hitler held remarkably similar views to the eugenicians in that he believed that a German woman’s duty to the Völkische community was to strictly adhere to “the duties which nature imposes.”²⁰ Eugenics was a form of social conservatism that could be detected within the state paternalism and social policies of German Fascism.

Marianna Valverde categorizes this period of the early women’s movement as “first-wave feminism.” The social roles of mothers as the bearers and moral teachers of children were framed within the social rationale of eugenics. Children were precious things to be nurtured, and women had a sacred duty as “mothers of the race.” The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) of Canada argued that, in exchange for women furthering the “uplift of the race” by reversing race degeneration, the state had a duty to extend to them equality rights and to banish the evil of alcohol. The fact that “women could shape the genetic pool was a necessary premise in the W.C.T.U.’s argument for political rights.” Valverde readily admits that early Canadian feminists “failed to question the racist presuppositions of evolutionary thought.” Non-Anglo-Saxons, or the “lower races,” were simply not a part of this regenerative process for Canadian society.

¹⁷ Jane Ursel, *Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1992), 36-37, 76-77.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Charles B. Davenport, “The Woman’s Movement and Eugenics,” *American Breeders Magazine* 2 (1911): 225-28.

²⁰ David Schoenbaum, *Hitler’s Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 180.

Canadian feminist and Alberta magistrate Emily Murphy, when asked why Nordic people were superior as a race, mused that it must have something to do with their proximity to the magnetic pole.²¹ Writing as “Janey Canuck,” Murphy lent her support to the sterilization campaigns in Alberta and British Columbia in the 1920s. Sterilizing the insane and criminals would protect women from sexual attacks that might result in unfit progeny and, therefore, would help “promote the mental and physical betterment of the race.”²² Canadian first-wave feminists also held deeply felt prejudicial views concerning non-Anglo-Saxon males. For example, Anglo-Saxon British Columbians commonly believed that Chinese males were opium dealers and White slavers.²³ Eugenics, stressing the biological abilities of Anglo-Saxon women, helped to unite and define social power.

Immediately following the First World War, middle-class fears about the advent of race suicide were further magnified. The “Red Scare” created an “atmosphere of xenophobia and class suspicion.”²⁴ Middle-class feminists agitated for even more curbs on immigration and increased sterilization measures. The death of a generation of Anglo-Saxon Canadian men on the battlefield created a decline in the birth rate of the “better stock.” The state was called upon to support motherhood and to view children as “national assets.” Well-baby clinics began to be funded in major Canadian cities, and baby contests played an increased role in promoting prenatal and postnatal health. The “medical gospel” of childcare was interspersed with “battle metaphors” in a “pro-natalist” campaign that had explicitly racial and nationalist overtones. Better babies began to be linked to national destiny, and doctors became the scientific proponents of this new nationalism. According to Cynthia Comacchio, the interwar child welfare movement in North America signalled a decline in the pro-natalist leadership role of women and an increase in the involvement of the medical profession. Doctors as well as medical experts dispensed

²¹ Marianna Valverde, “When the Mother of the Race Is Free: Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism,” in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Marianna Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 20, 16, 8, and 15. See also Valverde's *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991).

²² Angus McLaren, *Master Race*, 100-01.

²³ W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1978), 8-10.

²⁴ This paragraph largely derives from Cynthia R. Comacchio, *Nations Are Built of Babies: Saving Ontario's Mothers and Children, 1900-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 59-61.

advice and increasingly came to lead prenatal care, childcare, birth control, child welfare, and child psychiatric movements.

The Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene (CNCMH) was founded by Drs. C.K. Clarke and Clarence Hincks of Toronto in 1918. The committee's medical eugenicists began to stress that the mental health of children should be considered as important as their physical health. A healthy race needed not just healthy bodies but also healthy minds. Children were to be regarded as defective if either their mental or physical development was judged to be abnormal. Feeble-minded children had to be segregated from "normal" children as they were considered to be a source of social contagion.²⁵ By the 1920s the Canadian national effort to combat race suicide had become a fear-mongering business that involved raising a declining Anglo-Saxon birth rate, lobbying for restrictions on defective immigrants, and promoting the physical and mental health of the young Canadian race. In a recent radio program about the career of C.K. Clarke, the historian Angus McLaren made the following observation concerning why women were so attracted to Canadian eugenics:

Eugenics had an over representation of women amongst its early supporters. In part because ... it put such great stress on child bearing and on race betterment and on having better babies. And so that women were attracted to it, and upper-class women in particular ... because it spoke to what they saw as their needs. It also spoke to their concerns for education and child rearing. The fact that their children potentially were going to be mixing with immigrant children, say in schools, and the fear that they could suffer from the proximity with people who were of a lower mentality.²⁶

For the protection of society severely mentally defective children had to be locked away in asylums where sterilization measures, approved by Alberta in 1928 and by British Columbia in 1933, could then be conveniently applied through a program of negative eugenics.

The Advent of Baby Contests

In Canada, after the First World War human breeding was on everyone's mind, especially the minds of medical doctors and eugenicists. Angus

²⁵ Angus McLaren, *Master Race*, 59, 91-93.

²⁶ Angus McLaren, "Keeping This Young Country Sane: C.K. Clarke, Great Psychiatrist or Accomplished Eugenicist?" CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Radio One - *Ideas*, Monday, 17 April 2000.

McLaren believes this was merely a continuation of “the pre-World War One preoccupation with ‘race suicide’.” Dr. J.G. Adami, a professor of pathology at McGill, proposed extending the mental/physical grading system used on American war recruits to the general public for the purposes of breeding management. The term “A1,” which was coined by the Sanitary Corps of the American army to describe their best (as well as largely Anglo-Saxon) recruits, could be applied to the best men and women of Canada and, thus, lead to the creation of a “human stud book.” In a 1915 issue of the *Women’s Institute Quarterly* BC feminist and social reformer Alice Ravenhill offered breeding advice to women along with her domestic hints for bread baking and pickling.²⁷ In the United States the American Eugenics Society sponsored fitter family contests at state fairs, where medals inscribed with the slogan “Yea, I Have A Goodly Heritage” were awarded to winners. Mary Watts, an organizer of the 1920 Fitter Family Contest at the Kansas State Fair, explained that, “while the stock judges are testing Holsteins, Jerseys and White Faces in the stock pavilion, we are judging the Jones, Smiths & the Johnstons.” Watts proclaimed it was “about time people had a little of the attention that is given to animals.”²⁸ Human breeding, like animal husbandry, was to be handled scientifically.

Historian Martin Pernick believes that the “campaign for ‘better babies’ allied the American eugenics movement with an important woman’s issue,” the need to be valued by society for child-rearing work. The idea of producing these “better babies” was implanted in women’s minds en masse through such widely seen health films as *The Black Stork* (1916), which showed a doctor’s refusal to save a defective child. A ten-part 1921 film series entitled “Better Babies” specifically cautioned women to choose their mates carefully. Against medical advice a naive girl marries a man she knows to be mentally troubled, and her unborn child is destined to be just as mentally defective. Fortunately (in the opinion of the film’s doctor), she loses the baby.²⁹ Such health films were a form of public education and were shown at women’s exhibits in fairgrounds throughout North America during the 1920s.

However, the invention of better baby contests, or “baby shows,” actually occurred in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1908. It was the scheme

²⁷ Angus McLaren, *Master Race*, 45, 25-26.

²⁸ Adam Parfrey, “Eugenics: The Orphaned Science,” in *Apocalypse Culture*, ed. Adam Parfrey (San Francisco: Feral, 1990), 216-17; Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 11.

²⁹ Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of “Defective” Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35, 138.

of a former school teacher, Mrs. Frank DeGarmo, and a local medical doctor, J.M. Bodenheimer. DeGarmo had given up teaching upon marriage, as was then required, but subsequently became involved in such progressive causes as the establishment of a girls' training school, a state juvenile court system, and a program for the teaching of domestic science in public schools. She was an active organizer for the American Congress of Mothers. In fact, it was through the Congress of Mothers that DeGarmo spread the baby contests from Louisiana to various state fairs. Eventually the contests were taken up by a popular New York magazine, the *Woman's Home Companion*, which provided a package of materials, including physician scorecards for the babies and a booklet entitled *How to Hold a Better Baby Contest*. In 1913 a group of paediatric experts was assembled in New York to create a new scorecard to replace the original one devised by Bodenheimer. The motivations behind DeGarmo's initiation of the contests can only be deduced from two of her later publications: *The World's Baby Eugenic Almanac for Parents* and *The Eugenic Text-Book for Parents*, written with Dr. Caroline Skina.³⁰ It is entirely likely that such eugenic considerations as race suicide played a prominent role in the origins of the baby contest.

In Canada only Marianna Valverde's examination of the "Toronto Stork Derby" has dealt with the societal implications of a baby contest. The Stork Derby was more a breeding competition than a baby contest. It was the idea of an eccentric Toronto lawyer who bequeathed a large monetary award to the mother who would produce the most children in a single family in the decade following his death in 1926. What ensued by the time the contest closed in 1936 was an unseemly display of middle- and upper-class Toronto's contempt for the city's poor. The "reckless breeding" of the poor, who were attempting to win the contest, was portrayed by the press as a "spectre of the eugenically unfit" destabilizing society. Many court cases ensued, as people attempted to have the Stork Derby declared immoral and to revert all monies to the state. In the end, only illegitimate and unregistered children were disqualified. What infuriated the middle class of the city was the fact that many of the competing mothers were on relief and that the leading contestants were of Italian/Irish ethnic

³⁰ Anna Steese Richardson, "Better Babies in the South: How a Louisiana Woman Carried the Gospel of Better Babies Up the Mississippi," *Woman's Home Companion* 40, 7 (July 1913): 5; "Our Own Page: The Problem of the Score Card," *Woman's Home Companion* 40, 8 (August 1913): 3; "De Garmo, Mrs. Frank," *Women's Who's Who In America 1914-1915* (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914), 237.

extraction.³¹ Valverde's research serves to point out the broader eugenic logic of the thousands of better baby contests that had been occurring in Canada since before the First World War.

In the second part of this essay I examine the Vancouver and New Westminster better baby contests to see if they displayed a similar concern with the race suicide of middle-class Anglo-Saxons. Did the eugenic creed of the era sanction their creation or were they merely beauty contests for babies?

PART II: THE VANCOUVER
AND NEW WESTMINSTER
BETTER BABY CONTESTS, 1913-1929

Vancouver, 1913: Organizing the First Contest

Agricultural fairs may seem like strange venues for baby contests, but when one considers that eugenics was popularized by a committee of the American Breeders Association a link can immediately be detected. Animal breeders and baby contests both stressed the successful propagation of a species. Just as cattle and sheep had been improved by crossbreeding, and crops through plant hybridization, so it was believed that the Anglo-Saxon race could be improved through public displays of its bountiful fertility. The Vancouver Exhibition at Hastings Park and the New Westminster Provincial Exhibition at Queens Park were, above all else, showcases of the very best plant and animal species the province had to offer. However, the actual motivations behind the first baby contest held at the Vancouver Exhibition in 1913 are not readily apparent.

The 1913 contest was described in 1918 as "very elementary." It was an "untried" project whose purpose was "somewhat misunderstood by the general public." Judging was conducted through the "observation and comparison" of same-age babies set side by side. The first baby show took place on Saturday, 6 September 1913, "from 3 p.m. til after 6 p.m." There were over 600 babies entered, and Vancouver was told it could "certainly boast of ... a bonnie bunch of babies." It was a "display of infantile perfection" that drew impressive crowds of onlookers. On behalf of the Vancouver Local Council of Women, Mrs. W.M. Rose acted as chairperson of the contest, and it

³¹ Marianna Valverde, "Families, Private Property, and the State: The Dionnes and the Toronto Stork Derby," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29, 4 (Winter 1994-95): 16, 25-30.

was due to her efforts that the Vancouver Exhibition agreed to provide space for the contest. A Section of the Women's Department, which profiled the domestic arts, crafts, and charity work, would be reserved. There were prizes for the best developed boys and girls under one and between one and two years old. The press was told that the rationale for holding the contest was that it was a means "of creating greater interest in the scientific treatment of children ... in the light of recent discoveries dealing with the perfection of strong and healthy children." The first medical doctor connected to the contest was Dr. Carter of the Vancouver "creche," or foundling home, who assisted the "lady judges" in appraising the final competitors.³² No mention was made in the press of the eugenic goal of "race" betterment or similarly noble social purposes (except the promotion of scientific methods of child rearing). The first contest was a novelty that captured the fair-going public's attention. Its success assured the Vancouver Local Council of Women that it would have the exhibition's support in mounting another contest for the following year.

"Serious Affair, Not Mere Show":

The Vancouver Baby Contests from 1914 to 1918

In 1914, as the First World War broke out, the Better Baby Contest was again held at the Vancouver Exhibition, this time under the guidance of Mrs. W.M. Rose and Mrs. S.D. Scott of the Local Council of Women. It was called a "beauty contest," and gold medals were awarded to the best categories of babies. The description in the *Daily Province* leaves no doubt that it was a contest based upon superficialities. The three winners in the under-six-month category left the doctors with a difficult choice. However, one unlucky contestant, Master Sherman, "started to develop a sty in one eye." In the case of Master Jones, "a keen-eyed nurse found a tiny mole." Thus the cup went by default to the third boy, one Master Cummings of North Vancouver. Funding for the prizes was obtained from the Fraser Valley Milk Association as well as from various other local organizations. The prizes now included a gold medal for the champion, five loving cups, thirty-seven mugs, and seven bronze medals. There were two doctors in charge of the judging – Vancouver's assistant medical health officer, Dr. Edwin Dixon Carder, and child health

³² "Baby Show a Feature" and "Baby Contest," *Vancouver Sun*, 6 September 1913, 1 and 4; "Women's Department," *Vancouver Exhibition*, Bulletin 5 (1913): 24-25; "Sixth Better Babies Contest," *Western Women's Weekly* 2, 34 (3 August 1918): 7.

advocate Dr. Ella Scarlett Synge. Along with these new medical judges “many other city doctors also participated” in the contest. The organizing committee suggested that the contest be extended to a Young Mothers’ Clinic to be offered periodically at Vancouver General Hospital.³³

However, in 1915 the contest took an abrupt turn from a beauty contest to a serious scientific endeavour that would comprise “the hope of the race.” To find “a perfect baby” the medical doctors adopted “the rules laid down by the *Woman’s Home Companion*,” which were “accepted throughout Canada and the United States.” The “Better Babies Standard Score-Card,” as finalized by the 1913 panel of expert doctors assembled in New York by the *Woman’s Home Companion*, was adopted for the 1915 Vancouver contest.³⁴ A scoring system of 100 points was devised, and medical examiners set about looking for “flaws.” The contest’s new medical director, Dr. MacEachern, superintendent of Vancouver General Hospital, boasted that “no city in the world could have produced a finer lot of babies.”³⁵ When referring to the Baby Show, the *Daily Province* stated: “There has been nothing at any exhibition from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Circle to equal it.” Mrs. Scott talked at the Saturday prize distribution about the general appreciation of “such work for the human race,” while a doctor paid tribute to the benefits of “civic hygiene” as bestowed by a group of “well known experts.”³⁶

The public purpose of the contest was to promote child health, but the officious manner of the doctors and nurses in measuring their young charges for flaws of any sort was not lost on an anonymous newspaper critic known as Diogenes. In reference to the 1915 contest, Diogenes wrote that he peeped through glass partitions and found the baby contest was a “Serious Affair, Not Mere Show.” The score-cards contained eighteen criteria of evaluation that were meant to “tell mothers just where their babies stand physically.” The close relationship between the baby show and the physical examination of army inductees was not lost on Diogenes. He wrote: “These little

³³ “Better Babies Contest,” *Daily Province*, 11 September 1914, 7; “Sty or Mole Bad for Baby Entries,” *Daily Province*, 14 September 1914, 14; “Edwin Dixon Carder, M.D.,” in *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present*, ed. E.O.S. Scholefield and F.W. Howay, vol. 4 (Vancouver: J.J. Clarke, 1914), 85-86.

³⁴ “Judging the Babies,” *Daily Province*, 18 August 1915, 2; “Vancouver Baby Declared Perfect By Ten Physicians,” *Daily Province*, 20 August 1915, 7.

³⁵ “Vancouver Baby,” 7.

³⁶ “Some of the Important Features of the Big Fair: Baby Show at This Year’s Exhibition Declared to Be the Best in America,” *Daily Province*, 19 August 1915, 5.

conscripts for life's army – for they cannot be said to have enlisted voluntarily – are put through an ordeal as severe and searching as that employed for the recruits at our recruiting stations.” The medical doctors were “clothed in mystic white,” weighing “a little naked boy” on a pair of scales. The mother anxiously looked on waiting for the score while the baby boy was crying. “Symmetry” was a crucial qualification as the baby's body had to be in perfect proportion for the child's age. Diogenes declared: “There was not an item of his little anatomy that had been left out.” It began to resemble “some religious rite,” the “white-garbed doctor was the priest and the nurse the acolyte.” It was all so serious that Diogenes wondered what the mothers of days gone by did without the benefits of carrying away “Better Baby Score-Cards” and such pamphlets as *A Little Help for Expectant Mothers*.³⁷

It was clear from the “race” pronouncements of Mrs. Scott that the biological function of motherhood was being given paramount importance. As in all the contests held since 1913, the lists of prize winners and participants were entirely Anglo-Saxon. No ethnic minorities present in Vancouver at the time (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, East Indians, and First Nations peoples) can be detected among the lists of entrants. The fact that this contest occurred during the First World War and that the babies were called “little conscripts” as well as “the hope of the race” suggests that the concept of race suicide was actively considered. As young male Anglo-Saxon volunteers died in the trenches, babies were seen as the hope for race perpetuation. Also, Diogenes' characterization of medical doctors as almost forming a new priesthood of science is quite significant. Their alliance with mothers in this “work for the human race” was assuming ever greater importance.

The 1916 contest provided a very clear example of the perverted evolutionary theory associated with eugenics; that is, given the proper environment, the Anglo-Saxon would evolve towards perfection. Some babies had to be disqualified as their size exceeded the standards set for their age “by leading child specialists in the east.” This was an “injustice” because BC babies were on the “average larger and stronger than Eastern babies.” The contest doctors reasoned that it was the robust western climate that made Vancouver babies more fit than those from eastern cities, that clearly they had a biological advantage because of

³⁷ “Testing the Symmetry of Vancouver's Babies Diogenes Attends Interesting Contest at the Exhibition – Peeps through Glass Partition at Doctors Handling Tape and Scales – Serious Affair, Not Mere Show,” *Daily Province*, 20 August 1915, 14.

their birthplace.³⁸ However, judging the “dimpled darlings” was becoming problematic for the Vancouver Local Council of Women. In a letter dated 6 April 1916, Mrs. Scott, on behalf of the council, complained to Mr. Rolston of the Vancouver Exhibition that there was a lack of appreciation for the “amount of work, worry and wear and tear of nerves that it entails.” She requested that the “Exhibition Association ... make suitable arrangements ... favourable to our committee.” Since the exhibition provided prizes for everything “from Horses and Cattle to Machinery and Butter,” why could it not provide baby prizes? The Local Council of Women was “providing the brain[s] and energy” to organize the contest, and it felt that the exhibition was contributing very little. It is clear that the popularity of the Better Baby Contest was rapidly becoming a burden to its organizers.³⁹

The 1917 contest was much larger and more troublesome than the 1916 contest. There were eleven doctors in attendance under the direction of Dr. MacEachern, and there were eleven nurses (along with forty-two volunteers) who marked scorecards, processed paper work, undressed/dressed babies, and had a myriad of other duties. The youngsters entered in the contest had to be “limited to one thousand.”⁴⁰ The Local Council of Women, complaining of the monetary outlay they had to assume to stage the contest, made it quite plain in their report to the exhibition that the \$2,325 cash outlay for the 1917 contest was mainly devoted to permanent facility improvements and equipment. Ticket sales for the contest generated \$347, and a \$500 grant was obtained from the City of Vancouver. There was a deficit of \$1,478, and despite the fact “the Exhibition have only been called upon to provide the funds for perhaps half the money spent on permanent work,” no grant was forthcoming.⁴¹

There were certain aspects of the 1917 contest that were regarded as progressive; for example, the contest was now a “purely scientific” undertaking and judgments were no longer made according to beauty standards. To this end informative displays were mounted along with the baby contest. Professor Heatherington, an academic without stated university affiliation, helped to create an information booth

³⁸ “Every Section of the Exhibition Is Drawing Crowds,” *Daily Province*, 16 August 1916, 2; “Babyland Has Its Champions No Less Renowned Than Grown-ups,” *Daily Province*, 19 August 1916, 24.

³⁹ Mrs. S.D. Scott, Vancouver Local Council of Women, to Mr. Rolston, Manager of Vancouver Exhibition Association, 6 April 1916, Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, UBC.

⁴⁰ Mrs. S.D. Scott, “Better Babies Contest,” *Vancouver Exhibition*, Bulletin No. 8, 1917, 22-23.

⁴¹ E.J. Clark, “Better Babies Contest,” *Vancouver Exhibition*, Bulletin No. 8, 1917, 21-22.

on the “Deficient in Intellect.” He also gave talks on signs of mental abnormality and answered questions. The establishment of a twenty-bed children’s ward at the Vancouver General Hospital as a free clinic was seen as a direct benefit of the contests.⁴² It was clear that the baby contests were teaching the mothers and the public to appraise children in a scientific manner by looking for any signs of deficiency or ill health. Race betterment demanded healthy, normal babies as defined by experts and raised according to scientific principles.

The 1918 Better Baby Contest would be the last one held at the Vancouver Exhibition. Dr. Margaret Hogg was in charge of the infant medical examinations and was “kept busy practically from morning till night.” The rationale for the contest was “to secure constant improvement in the physical condition of the babies of Vancouver.” Each child was given a thorough medical examination, while the mother received “a card telling her in what direction her child [fell] short of the standard desired.” Prizes were awarded “along the lines of physical perfection.”⁴³ Physical perfection seemed to have been an acquired trait among the babies entered in the contest that year. In fact, the babies were remarkably robust, according to the comments of Dr. J.A. Sutherland. Of the fifty entries he judged, he had to conclude that local babies were again “larger than eastern babies.” Using the charts for eastern babies, Sutherland declared that local babies were “like our trees, bigger and handsomer.” Such differences were most likely accounted for by the mild climate that allowed the babies to take the air outdoors every month of the year.⁴⁴ The babies of Canada’s West Coast were the products of their hearty environment, which seemed to cause genetic improvements in the Anglo-Saxon race itself.

No contest was held in 1919, and the stated reason was that the Local Council of Women decided to dedicate itself to “essential National War Work.” A letter of 5 July 1919 to Mr. Rolston of the exhibition made it clear that the Local Council could not find “anyone to take charge of the Better Babies Contest.” Such “year after year work” would naturally take a toll on the volunteers and “undoubtedly prove to be a strain.” The letter invited the exhibition to “get someone to take charge of this department.”⁴⁵ The reason for the abrupt end

⁴² Scott, “Better Babies,” 23.

⁴³ “Interest Is Great This Year,” *Western Women’s Weekly* 1, 35 (10 August 1918): 7.

⁴⁴ “Better Babies Contest Attraction at Fair Grounds,” *Daily Province*, 20 August 1918, 8.

⁴⁵ “Weak Points,” *Vancouver Exhibition*, Bulletin No. 9, 1918, p. 11; Mrs. Charles R. Stoddard, Vancouver Local Council of Women to Mr. Rolston, Manager, Vancouver Exhibition Association, 5 July 1919, Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, UBC.

to the Vancouver Better Baby Contest remains unclear. War strain alone would not account for the decision by the Local Council of Women to end it. However, regardless of how it ended, the contest can be viewed as a eugenic project meant to counteract the threat of Anglo-Saxon race suicide. It began as a novel beauty contest, but the growing rhetoric around race betterment, motherhood, and medical control over child rearing caused it to quickly evolve into a breeding display for children. These aspects of the contest would become extremely pronounced when the New Westminster Local Council of Women assumed control over it in 1919.

New Westminster:

The Better Baby Contest Moves to the Royal City

The move of the Better Baby Contest to New Westminster in 1919 is not mentioned in David Breen's official history of the Vancouver Exhibition. In fact, Breen simply states that the contest was cancelled "owing to a lack of organizational support."⁴⁶ Regardless of Vancouver's inability to organize the contest, New Westminster was prepared to stage the event each fall until the untimely destruction by fire of its exhibition buildings in 1929. New Westminster was the perfect location, for its exhibition was truly provincial in scope as it had served as the premier agricultural fair for the province's mainland since the 1860s. It was to New Westminster that cattle breeders, sheep farmers, and orchardists sent the best examples of their livestock as well as agricultural products. Crossbreeding of animal herds created better stock, and new fruit varieties were created by cross-pollination. Human stock display was a logical extension of the same concept. Also, several medical doctors who were connected to the two major mental health institutions of the province resided in New Westminster. The main insane asylum, known as the Public Hospital for the Insane (PHI), was located in the city itself, and the Colony Farm/Essondale extension complex was in the nearby community of Coquitlam. Essondale was the location of a farm colony employing asylum patients, a new insane asylum for men, and a new boys industrial school. New Westminster also had one of the most important hospitals in the province – the Royal Columbian Hospital. Medical expertise was not lacking.

It was the New Westminster Local Council of Women that decided to hastily organize a better baby contest in 1919, when Vancouver's

⁴⁶ David H. Breen and Kenneth Coates, *Vancouver's Fair: An Administrative and Political History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1982), 52.

WORKING FOR BETTER BABIES INTERESTED IN PROMOTING HEALTH OF BABIES ENERGETIC WORKER FOR BETTER BABIES



MISS, A. S. STARK, R.N., New Westminster, who with Mrs. Paul Smith heads the Managing Committee of the Better Babies' Contest.



DR. J. G. MCKAY
Vice-president of the R. A. & I. Society and Joint Director with the New Westminster Local Council of Women, of the Managing Committee of the Better Babies Contest at the Provincial Exhibition next month.



MRS. PAUL SMITH
President, New Westminster Local Council of Women and one of the heads of Managing Committee of Better Babies Contest.

The public face of the New Westminster Better Babies Contest. Dr. J.G. McKay was "interested in promoting health in babies" and Mrs. Paul Smith was an "energetic worker for better babies." Miss A.S. Stark, R.N., was "working for better babies." Race improvement was not openly proclaimed as a contest goal as it had been during the Vancouver years. *Western Woman's Weekly* 4, 38 (27 August 1921): 4.

decision not to do so was made public. Mrs. Paul Smith of the Local Council was in charge, along with Miss Stark, RN, who was head nurse. In addition, six nurses and twelve assistants "were required each day" to help process the infants. Medical director Dr. J.G. McKay was assisted by many "doctors of the city" as well as by Dr. MacEachern from Vancouver. The prizes were personally awarded by Mr. C.A. Welsh, president of the RA&I society that governed the provincial exhibition. The first contest was an overwhelming success as the "contest quarters could not hold the crowds of men, women and children who wanted to just catch a glimpse of the babies." It was stressed that the "real object" of the contest was its "educational value" as there were bound to be "many disappointed mothers" when the final winners were announced. The entire contest was conducted under the careful attention of Dr. McKay, who was "present every day of the contest to supervise examinations."⁴⁷ James Gordon McKay was a psychiatrist trained at McGill University who came to New Westminster in 1905 and was, by 1907, assistant medical superintendent of the PHI. In 1914 Dr. McKay became acting superintendent of the PHI when its permanent director, Dr. Charles Doherty, left for war duty. In 1916 Dr.

⁴⁷ "Baby Darlings Are Centre of Much Interest," *British Columbian*, 3 October 1919, 1; "Baby Miller Is Champion," *British Columbian*, 6 October 1919, 1 and 6.

McKay, as medical superintendent of the extension asylum, opened Westlawn, the first building at the Essondale Mental Hospital in neighbouring Coquitlam. Leaving government service in 1918, Dr. McKay established the first private mental hospital in the province, the Hollywood Sanatorium, so named for the many holly bushes on its New Westminster grounds.

Dr. McKay, a leading figure in the campaign to pass a provincial sterilization act for the feeble-minded, was an acknowledged eugenicist who asserted before the 1925 Royal Commission on Mental Hygiene that 60 per cent to 70 per cent of all mental problems were inherited. This was disputed by the evidence of Dr. Helen P. Davidson of New Westminster, a Stanford-trained psychologist, which showed that, at best, only 11 per cent to 30 per cent of cases of mental defect found at the PHI were due to heredity. The commission was chaired by a fellow New Westminster physician, Dr. E.J. Rothwell, and most of the evidence given by outside experts supported the need for forced sterilization due to the hereditary transmission of insanity.⁴⁸ Dr. McKay was always known for his extreme views; for example, in 1917 he declared that syphilis accounted for 10 per cent of all admissions to the PHI in that year. He urged complete segregation of these “congenital deficient.” In a 1914 biographical sketch of McKay’s life it was noted that “he is especially interested in insanity and its attendant ills.”⁴⁹ Dr. McKay was a provincial member of the CNCMH, which sought to implement eugenic policies across Canada. Many medical colleagues and fellow New Westminsterites were also active members of the CNCMH.⁵⁰ It was this medical background that Dr. McKay brought to the judging of the New Westminster better baby contests.

⁴⁸ McLaren, *Master Race*, 96–97.

⁴⁹ Val Adolph, *In the Context of Its Time: A History of Woodlands* (Victoria: Ministry of Social Services, 1996), 70, 66, 69; “James Gordon McKay, M.D., C.M.” in Scholefield and Howay, *British Columbia*, vol. 4, p. 85; For a more detailed history of Dr. McKay and the Hollywood Sanatorium, see Stuart C. MacLean, *Hollywood Hospital: A Historical Sketch* (1971) in the New Westminster Public Library Reference Section (R 362.1 M223h).

⁵⁰ The 1920 monograph of the “Mental Hygiene Survey of the Province of British Columbia” (1919) as published by *The Canadian Journal of Mental Hygiene* 2, 1 (April 1920) contains a 1919 CNCMH membership list on its back page. The list includes Dr. J.G. McKay, New Westminster, BC, but it also cites fellow PHI medical staff Dr. A.L. Crease, Dr. H.C. Steeves, and Major (Dr.) G.H. Manchester (the head of PHI from 1900 to 1905). Prominent New Westminster citizen and historian Judge Frederick W. Howay is also cited. The University of British Columbia was represented by its president, Dean L.S. Klinck, its chancellor, Dr. R.E. McKechnie, and governors BC Supreme Court Justice Denis Murphy and the Reverend Principal Vance of the Anglican Theological College. Prominent businessmen of the province included H.H. Morris (BC Division, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce), George Kidd (BC Electric Co.), Christopher Spencer (David Spencer Ltd., department store), and Blake Wilson (VP Burns Meat Packing; Pacific Great Eastern Railway; BC Pulp and Paper Co.;



The “Womens Building” at the New Westminster Exhibition Grounds in Queens Park. It was in this building from 1919 to 1929 that the New Westminster Local Council of Women held their annual Better Baby Contest. Irving House Museum and Archives, New Westminster, BC.

*Better Baby Contests in
New Westminster: The 1920s*

The 1920s began with a request for more space on the second floor of the Industrial Exhibition Hall for the Better Baby Contest. It was agreed, for 1921, “not to limit the number of entries as was done last year.” Miss Alice Wise was in charge of supervising the entries for the Local Council of Women. Dr. McKay was once again the medical supervisor, and the exhibition’s president, Mr. C.A. Welsh, presented the prizes. There were 225 contestants and, of all the babies that entered, “not one of them scored less than 89 per cent.” In the opinion of the medical men, “all could be called better babies.” The contest

director, Ocean Falls Pacific Mills; Dominion Bridge Company Ltd.; BC Power Corporation). Political figures included the likes of the Honourable J.D. Maclean (minister of education/finance; provincial secretary and future premier, 1927–28), Mrs. Ralph Smith/Mary Ellen Smith (MLA for South Vancouver, wife of labour activist Ralph Smith, first female Cabinet minister in the British Empire), and Dr. Henry Esson Young (provincial secretary; education minister; secretary, provincial board of health). The complete list of CNCMH members is available from Woodward Library, UBC (WM11 OC2.1 B7 C2).

Winners in Better Babies' Contest at New Westminster Exhibition



The 1921 winners of the Better Baby Contest held at the New Westminster Exhibition Grounds in Queens Park. Medical Supervisor Dr. G.S. Purvis stated it was not merely a beauty contest and mentioned there were several 100 per cent babies in the show. Medical Supervisor Dr. J.G. McKay was pleased by the growing interest in the annual contest. *Western Woman's Weekly* 4, 42 (24 September 1921): 1.

winner, Bobbie Richardson of New Westminster, scored 99.5 points out of a possible 100.⁵¹ It was clear that a scorecard system of infant evaluation, similar to that used in the Vancouver contests, was being employed.

An emphasis on positive eugenics made the scorecard the main instrument of scientific child improvement in the baby contests. An example of a scorecard was located for an entrant of the 1927 contest in New Westminster; it concerned one Douglas James Young, age twenty-six months, of South Vancouver. Head contour, palate, intelligence (gauged through sensory measures such as expression), nutrition, weight, physical measurements, symmetry, and special indices (such as heart, lungs, glands, skin, bone development, teeth, the abdominal cavity, tonsils, adenoids, and genitalia) were appraised according to a point system, with a total of either three or four for each item. The ability to stand/walk, hygiene, and feeding capacity were gauged separately, using a four- to six- to ten-point scale. Douglas scored ninety-nine out of 100 points. He only lost points on his expression, weight, and

Entry No. <u>22</u> 24 Months & Under 36 Months	
Provincial Exhibition New Westminster, B. C.	
"BETTER BABIES CONTEST"	
Score Card	
Name	<u>Douglas James Young</u>
Parent's Name	<u>Mrs. James Young</u>
Address	<u>1853 - 48 Ave. E. South Van.</u>
Age	<u>26 months</u>
	A
1. Contour of Head, Face, Eyes, Ears, Nose	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
2. Palate	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
3. Intelligence	Points Obtainable 3 Points Awarded <u>3</u>
(a) Hearing	Points Obtainable 3 Points Awarded <u>3</u>
(b) Vision	Points Obtainable 3 Points Awarded <u>3</u>
(c) Speech	Points Obtainable 3 Points Awarded <u>3</u>
(d) Expression	Points Obtainable 3 Points Awarded <u>2 3/4</u>
	B
4. Nutrition	Points Obtainable 8 Points Awarded <u>8</u>
5. Weight	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>3 3/4</u>
6. Measurements—	
(a) Height	Points Obtainable 2 Points Awarded <u>2</u>
(b) Circumference Head	Points Obtainable 2 Points Awarded <u>2</u>
(c) Circumference Chest	Points Obtainable 2 Points Awarded <u>2</u>
(d) Circumference Abdomen	Points Obtainable 2 Points Awarded <u>2</u>
7. General Symmetry and Proportions in General	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
8. Special—	
(a) Heart	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(b) Lungs	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(c) Abdominal Viscera	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(d) Glandular System	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(e) Skin	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(f) Bony System	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(g) Genitalia	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>3 1/2</u>
(h) Teeth	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
(i) Tonsils and Adenoids	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
9. Ability to stand or walk	Points Obtainable 4 Points Awarded <u>4</u>
	C
10. Mode of Feeding	Points Obtainable 10 Points Awarded <u>10</u>
11. Hygiene	Points Obtainable 6 Points Awarded <u>6</u>
Total Points	Points Obtainable 100 Points Awarded <u>99</u>
	D
Defects requiring attention	

The Columbian Co. Print

The Better Baby Score Card adapted from the *Women's Home Companion* and used at the New Westministe contest in 1927. Invented by Dr. J.M. Bodenheimer of Louisiana in 1908, the card was amended in 1913 by medical experts sponsored by the Better Babies Bureau of the *Women's Home Companion*. Irving House Museum and Archives, New Westminster, BC.

⁵¹ "More Space for Babies Contest at New Westminster," *Western Women's Weekly* 3, 39, (4 September 1920): 5; "Judges Select Champion Baby," *British Columbian*, 4 October 1920, 1.



Certificate of Achievement for Douglas James Young at the New Westminister Better Babies Contest of 1927. Irving House Museum and Archives, New Westminister, BC.

genitalia. He probably didn't smile, was a little underweight, and was not sufficiently endowed for his age. He had no "defects requiring attention."⁵²

In 1921 the medical work of the contest became too much for Dr. McKay because his duties as vice-president of the RA&I Society prevented him "from giving the necessary time to the children." The medical supervisor then became Dr. G.S. Purvis, who hoped the public would recognize that the Better Baby Contest was "not just a beauty contest, but a clinic." The winner of the contest, Doris Eileen Bowell, was "a 100 per cent baby" in her class for girls between six and twelve months old. For those babies who did not make the 100 per cent category, of which there were many among the 300 contestants, the mothers were told exactly why their children didn't make the grade. On the scorecard "any flaw or deficiency either in external

⁵² The better baby scorecard and 1927 certificate for Douglas James Young, as judged at the New Westminister Exhibition. Documents found at Irving House Museum and Archives. Permission to reproduce granted by Archie Miller, curator.

beauty or internal soundness is detected and noted.”⁵³ Many mothers left the contest not only with information on proper feeding and hygiene, but also with the sense that their children were forever flawed.

As the 1920s progressed, the baby contests steadily grew and became ever more successful. In 1922 over 300 babies were entered, and it took five afternoon sessions with six to eight doctors, ten nurses, and ten helpers to simply process the entrants. The *British Columbian* newspaper placed the “class winners” of babies beside a column that profiled the “sire class” of prize Holstein cows.⁵⁴ In 1923 it was announced that many “Nearly Perfect Babies Are Found.” These were babies who scored around ninety-nine points and, except for a slight defect, would have been 100 per cent babies. The *British Columbian* stated that the “babies were judged with regard to cleanliness, healthy appearance, the absence of physical defects, freedom from skin blemishes, feeding, proportion as to height, weight, circumference of head and chest, the heart, lungs, teeth, bony system, etc.” The overall winner for 1923 was Susan Ravenhill, who came from the isolated Sunshine Coast hamlet of Wilson Creek and was “an out of doors baby.”⁵⁵ She fulfilled the ideal image of a healthy, better baby – a robust Anglo-Saxon child raised in the great outdoors. In 1924 a new prize category was introduced for the “least sturdy set of twins.” Ten sets of twins were entered in that contest.⁵⁶ Like livestock, babies could be graded from the most sturdy to the least.

Midway through the exhibition week of 1925 over 105 babies were registered for the contest in one day alone. In fact, there was a “surplus of entries” from “all parts of the province.” In the end 300 entries were accepted, while over 100 babies were turned away. Dr. Purvis was replaced by Dr. Bruce McEwen, who relayed that every baby was given “a complete and scientific examination and record.” Babies were coming from all over the province and even from Washington State. This provided “abundant proof of the general appreciation of the educational value of the work.” It didn’t matter if the child won a

⁵³ “New Westminster News,” *Western Women’s Weekly* 4, 38, (27 August 1921): 11; “Doris Bowell Is Champion,” *British Columbian*, 19 September 1921, 1 and 4; “New Westminster News,” *Western Women’s Weekly* 4, 35 (6 August 1921): 11.

⁵⁴ “Betty Clark Is Champion Baby” and “Improving upon Foundation Stock,” *British Columbian*, 18 September 1922, 1.

⁵⁵ “Nearly Perfect Babies Are Found,” *British Columbian*, 13 September 1923, 1; “Susan Ravenhill Winner of Championship Award in Better Babies Contest,” *British Columbian*, 17 September 1923, 1.

⁵⁶ “Another Prize Added to List,” *British Columbian*, 13 September 1924, 2.

prize or not because each mother was given a “complete score card” along with a “printed table of standards” for baby development. Such medical advice could not fail to result in “marked improvement.”⁵⁷ Volunteer staff and doctors at a 1926 banquet heralded the baby contest as the “best ever.” Dr. McEwen’s praise for the medical staff was echoed by Dr. D.H.O. Harry of Essondale and Dr. Manchester, director of the PHI in New Westminster. The fact that babies had come from Chilliwack, Abbotsford, Upper Sumas, and even Bellingham, Washington, as well as “other equally distant points,” attested to the public’s interest in the event.⁵⁸

In 1927 a direct parallel was drawn between the livestock shows and the baby contest at the exhibition. The *British Columbian* stated:

It has been said that exhibition societies have devoted too much time and energy to the development of live stock to the exclusion of the young of the human species, but this cannot be said of the B.C. Provincial Exhibition management, which yearly stages this elaborated feature with the cooperation of the Local Council of Women. Mothers are reminded that handsome prizes are awarded ... among five classes, the ages covered being: 6 months, 6 to 12 months, 12 to 24 months, 24 to 36 months and twins.⁵⁹

Clearly, the propagation of the “young of the human species” was a serious enterprise, and the baby contests were a means of race improvement. The involvement of many prominent doctors in New Westminster connected to local asylums and the CNCMH only further attested to the fact that the contests were based upon eugenic considerations as much as upon medical ones. As in the Vancouver contest all entrants were Anglo-Saxon, and, although there were no longer any direct references in the press to “race progress,” this goal had become an accepted fact.

In 1928 the province’s premier, S.F. Tolmie, opened “the greatest Provincial Exhibition in the history of the Royal Agricultural and Industrial Society.”⁶⁰ The Better Baby Contest was an integral part of the exhibition’s success, and it had been decided to allow all babies, regardless of their age, to be entered in the contest. It was felt that

⁵⁷ “More Than One Hundred Babies Already Entered for Exhibition Contest,” *British Columbian*, 26 August 1925, 1; “Surplus of Entries in Babies Contest,” *British Columbian*, 1 September 1925, 1; “Billie Baker Champion of Baby Contest,” *British Columbian*, 14 September 1925, 1.

⁵⁸ “Baby Contest Was Best Ever,” *British Columbian*, 13 September 1926, 4.

⁵⁹ “Better Babies Department Will Be Open for Entries Very Soon, Mrs. C.D. Peele Contest Secretary,” *British Columbian*, 10 August 1927, 8.

⁶⁰ “Exhibition Establishes New Record: Curtain Rises Monday on Greatest Show Ever Staged in History of R.A.&I. Society,” *British Columbian*, 1 September 1928, 1 and 4.

including every baby would better serve the educational purpose of the project because then each mother would receive a scorecard. The *British Columbian* proclaimed:

The score card for the Better Babies Contest indicates the scientific and modern basis of child progress splendidly. Under the heading of hygiene, for example, is recorded whether baby sleeps in the open, how many windows in the room if baby sleeps inside and how many windows are open.⁶¹

The scorecards represented the intervention of medical science into the traditional practices of motherhood. The ideal was not really a healthy baby per se as most babies who were brought to the contest were essentially healthy. The ideal child was a physically perfect Anglo-Saxon who was rated as 100 per cent during the medical examination. Any “defects requiring attention, if revealed by the scientific examination of experts, are pointed out.”⁶² However, when such defects were pointed out they could plague a person for life. In the course of writing this work a relative of the author recalled a story told by her mother. In 1925 or 1926, Mrs. Bradford took her daughter, Eileen, to the Better Baby Contest at the New Westminster Exhibition. The baby was judged less than perfect because of a “pug” nose. The anger of Mrs. Bradford over the doctor’s criticism of her infant was still very evident when the story was retold many years later.⁶³

In 1929 the exhibition and its better baby contests came to a sudden end in a blaze that consumed the fair’s aging wooden buildings in just over an hour.⁶⁴ The New Westminster buildings were not rebuilt, and Vancouver’s Hastings Park then assumed the role of the province’s main exhibition for livestock, farm produce, horticulture, and a myriad of other displays that, until recently, still made up the modern Pacific National Exhibition. The Better Baby Contest was not taken up by the Vancouver Exhibition; however, in local fairs around the province various chapters of the Women’s Institutes continued the work.⁶⁵

⁶¹ “Entries Roll in for Better Babies Contest at Provincial Fair,” *British Columbian*, 18 August 1928, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Interview with Mrs. Eileen Thomson, nee Bradford, on 20 June 1999, concerning her mother’s telling of entering her in the New Westminster Better Baby Contest of 1925 or 1926.

⁶⁴ “Exhibition Buildings Destroyed by Fire, But Society Will Hold Fair,” *British Columbian*, 15 July 1929, 1.

⁶⁵ “Winners in Baby Contest Named at Chilliwack Fair,” *British Columbian*, 30 August 1929, 7; “Prize Babies Over One Year Judged,” *British Columbian*, 31 August 1929, 3.

FROM BETTER BABIES TO
BETTER BRITISH COLUMBIANS

The better baby contests of the 1920s were more than mere infant medical checkups. The medical and psychiatric doctors involved in the contests, along with the Local Councils of Women, were uniting to become one of the most prominent lobby groups to propose legislation sanctioning the forced sterilization of the feeble-minded and social undesirables. In the 1920s Dr. McKay, along with the Local Councils of Women in New Westminster and Vancouver, aggressively lobbied for compulsory sterilization as a socially necessary form of negative eugenics. They wanted a eugenics board similar to Alberta's, and they wanted the BC legislature to pass a sexual sterilization act. The involvement in this project of the Local Councils of Women, along with many prominent medical doctors, is well documented by historian Angus McLaren.⁶⁶ However, the fact that these same doctors and women's leaders were also involved in the baby contests is a new revelation. Dr. McKay expressed full support for the Sterilization Bill of 1933 and said that he had been working for such a measure for over fifteen years. Dr. McKay stated that "sterilization is very much desired" by progressive medical men, and he was, in fact, later appointed to the province's new Board of Eugenics. Dr. Edwin Dixon Carder, an early participant in the Vancouver better baby contests, said his "feelings on the subject were too strong to express in words." He believed that it "should have been done years ago as an economic procedure" to curb the increase of the feeble-minded and their attendant social costs.⁶⁷

In July 1926, the Vancouver Council of Women wrote to Dr. McKay at the Hollywood Sanatorium asking him to speak on the sterilization of the unfit, and in August he replied that he would be pleased to do so.⁶⁸ In early 1925 the Vancouver Council of Women received a resolution from its sister organization in New Westminster, which was to be brought before the April general meeting. The resolution read:

⁶⁶ McLaren, *Master Race*, 101-06.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 105; "Sterilization Law Lauded by Doctors," *Vancouver News*, 3 April 1933, 1 and 8.

⁶⁸ Mrs. H.J.K. Labsik, Correspondence Secretary, Vancouver Local Council of Women, to Dr. J.G. McKay, Hollywood Sanatorium, New Westminster, 28 July 1926; Dr. J.G. McKay to Mrs. H.J.K. Labsik, 7 August 1926. Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, UBC.

Resolved that this Council endorse the recommendation of the Mental Hygiene Committee that we petition the legislature through the Special Commission that a law be passed making sterilization for both sexes of the mentally deficient lawful under the jurisdiction of a board of examiners and recommend the family physician, if any, be consulted and his consent obtained.⁶⁹

The commission referred to was the Royal Commission on Mental Hygiene of 1925, which heard from such eugenicists as Dr. C.M. Hincks and Dr. C.B. Farrar of the CNCMH. There was even a submission from Paul Popenhoe of the California Human Betterment Foundation, a botanist who became interested in human rather than plant propagation.⁷⁰ The Mental Hygiene Committee of the Vancouver Local Council of Women consisted of former reformist school board chairwoman, Mrs. Irene H. Moody; the supervisor of Vancouver schools' special classes for subnormal children, Miss A.J. Dauphinee; and a school psychologist who believed in the hereditary transmission of feeble-mindedness, Miss Ruby Kerr. Beginning in the early 1920s this committee was tireless in promoting the sterilization of the mentally unfit and persistently lobbied the provincial secretary, S.L. Howe, throughout the late 1920s, leading up to the passage of the Sterilization Bill in 1933. When the legislation was proclaimed, the press noted that "a number of ... Women's groups in the province have been urging legislation of this nature for some years past."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Mrs. H.J.K. Labsik, Correspondence Secretary, Vancouver Local Council of Women, to the Presidents of Affiliated Societies re: Sterilization Resolution of New Westminster Local Council of Women, April 1925, Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, UBC.

⁷⁰ McLaren, *Master Race*, 97.

⁷¹ Mrs. Irene H. Moody, Convenor of Mental Hygiene Committee to the Vancouver Local Council of Women, 4 April 1924; Mrs. Irene H. Moody, Convenor Mental Hygiene Committee, Miss Ruby A. Kerr, Miss A. Josephine Dauphinee, and Mrs. Jane Steeves to the Honourable S.L. Howe, Provincial Secretary, re: Resolutions in respect to the problem of the Feeble-Minded, 21 June 1929; Mrs. Irene H. Moody to the Honourable S.L. Howe, Provincial Secretary, re Inquiry into lack of response concerning letter of 21 June 1929, 30 April 1930; the Honourable S.L. Howe to Mrs. H.J.K. Labsik, Correspondence Secretary, Vancouver Local Council of Women, re: Response to letter of 21 June 1929, 6 May 1930. Vancouver Council of Women Records, Special Collections, UBC. "Sterilization Law Lauded by Doctors," *Vancouver News*, 3 April 1933, 1 and 8. For a detailed examination of the role of the Mental Hygiene Committee, see Gerald E. Thomson, "Remove from Our Midst These Unfortunates" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The better baby contests had been part of a multifaceted strategy to infuse eugenic policies into the lives of British Columbians. The sterilization and segregation of the unfit would be complemented by the propagation of the fit through scientific breeding. The contests were a theatrical means of alerting Anglo-Saxon British Columbians to the goal of increasing their numbers in order to counteract the effects of the immigration of certain undesirable races and the loss of young Anglo-Saxon manhood in the First World War. Although anti-immigrant rhetoric was not detected in this study, it is an undeniable fact that all the contestant lists examined contained only Anglo-Saxon surnames. In the early Vancouver contests there were also overt references to the “progress of the race,” which strongly suggests a belief in the eugenic notion of eventual Anglo-Saxon race suicide. The focus of the contests on breeding and race propagation is also quite evident. As was stated in 1927, “too much time and energy” had been devoted “to the development of livestock to the exclusion of the young of the human species.”⁷² Of course it was assumed that only certain racial types of the human species required more time and energy; namely, the Anglo-Saxons of the province.

The fact that minority groups were overly represented in the mental asylums as well as in the prisons of the province (and that they were the subjects of sterilization procedures) is well established. When William Sloan, the provincial secretary, first called for a mental hygiene commission in 1925, he cited the fact that 60 per cent of the province’s inmate population were foreigners. He voiced the alarmist fear “that British Columbia was becoming a dumping ground for foreign misfits.” Similarly, the spokesperson for the province’s Local Councils of Women, MLA for South Vancouver Mary Ellen Smith, made her position on sterilization quite clear. “If this were done,” she was reported in the press as saying, “the English speaking peoples would maintain their position of supremacy on which the peace and prosperity of the world depend.”⁷³ The campaign for better babies in British Columbia was really all about maintaining social supremacy. This becomes very apparent when one considers that it coexisted with the drive by the Local Councils of Women to implement a sterilization

⁷² “Better Babies Department Will be Open for Entries Very Soon, Mrs. C.D. Peele Contest Secretary,” *British Columbian*, 10 August 1927, 8.

⁷³ Angus McLaren, *Master Race*, 95.

act. Attempting to increase the birth rate of Anglo-Saxon British Columbians while preventing so-called mentally defective non-Anglo-Saxons from reproducing is a social strategy entirely consistent with the eugenic fear of race suicide. The hard work that the Local Councils of Women devoted to the better baby contests extended well beyond helping with annual preparations and the staging of the events themselves: it was part of an organized effort to integrate eugenic reasoning into the social life of the province.