

**“THE TRUE [POLITICAL] MOTHERS OF TODAY”:**

FARM WOMEN AND THE ORGANIZATION OF

EUGENIC FEMINISM IN ALBERTA

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the rise of feminist agrarian politics in Alberta and the ideological basis for their support of extreme health care reforms, including eugenics. The early twentieth century eugenics movement is frequently described as a movement grounded in scientific domination over women's bodies. Yet despite having an apparent anti-feminist stance, in the hands of women eugenics also became a platform within which discourses of female social power could be embodied within a broader conceptualization of motherhood. Feminist organizations in the province, primarily the United Farm Women of Alberta, were critical to organizing and politicizing rural women and lobbying the government for control over the laws which governed affairs of the home.

This study offers new perspectives on the legacy of first-wave feminism as an ideology steeped in rhetoric of child welfare and maternal health which sought to fundamentally alter society. Within the United Farmers of Alberta, women created a space for feminized political interests that focused primarily on social welfare, health, and education. These women put very little political effort toward suffrage, rather viewed the vote as a necessary and inevitable step to the future progress of the nation. Women, they believed, needed to be actively and intelligently involved in political life to promote those politics which supported "good motherhood."

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Abbreviation

<i>GGG</i>	<i>Grain Growers' Guide</i>
UFA	United Farmers of Alberta
UFWA	United Farm Women of Alberta
WAUFA	Women's Auxiliary to the United Farmers of Alberta (1915 exclusively)
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union
WGG	Women Grain Growers



## INTRODUCTION

### **CONSTRUCTING A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF EUGENIC FEMINISM**

Emily Murphy became the first female magistrate in the British Empire in 1916 for the newly-created Women's Court in Edmonton. Her early court rulings were regularly challenged, not due to her lack of formal legal training, but on the grounds that she was not legally a person and therefore had no right to occupy the office of magistrate. Responding to the significant legal barrier for women represented by the language of the British North America Act, Emily Murphy led Alberta's Famous Five, including Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, and Nellie McClung, in an attempt to change the terms of the Act and gain legal recognition of women as persons. Despite the corresponding 1928 case, which further determined that women were not qualified persons, victory for the Famous Five came in the success of the Persons Case on 18 October 1929. Heralded as the greatest of her many lifetime achievements, the Persons Case memorialized Murphy and the Famous Five as truly great Canadians. Murphy's victory symbolically represents the successes of first-wave feminism within Canada more generally, and the efforts of the movement are represented as a dramatic change in public perception of women within Canadian society.

Historians have celebrated Murphy's legacy as an ideal symbolic representation of Canadian first-wave feminism. For example, much historical writing on Murphy and the Canadian feminists has focused on female agency, highlighting specifically how these

pioneering women played a role in their own histories, and the histories of all women who would come after them.<sup>1</sup> Plaques honouring Murphy's life were dedicated in Edmonton in 1958, and celebrated her as "a crusader for social reform and for equal status for women . . . originator and leader of the movement," stating that she will remain "well known for her warm humanity and for her public service which brought her recognition throughout Canada."<sup>2</sup> These plaques illustrate how Murphy and the early Canadian feminists are typically represented in the historic record, often celebrated as great heroines who devoted their lives to improving those of average Canadian women.

However, later feminists criticized this perception of the first wave, arguing that their efforts did not fundamentally change the structure of society, but merely shifted relationships within the patriarchal society. Often, first-wave feminists have been minimalized as "merely" maternal feminists due to their particular construction of feminism which emphasized the primacy of motherhood. For example, famous second-wave feminist Simone de Beauvoir was frequently critical of any woman who subscribed to maternal feminism. She argued that any idealization of "feminine" traits was merely a reinforcement by men to confine women to their oppressed states.<sup>3</sup> Though primarily an ideological dispute, this pejorative construction of any early version of feminism which emphasized either the female sphere or motherhood specifically has influenced the way

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<sup>1</sup> Books such as . . . *and mighty women too: stories of notable western Canadian women* (MacEwan, 1975), *Emily Murphy: Rebel* (Mander, 1985), *Emily Murphy and the Case of the Missing Persons* (Millar, 1999), *100 Canadian Heroines* (Foster, 2004), provide excellent examples of this type of "her-story," though there are many more that fit this category.

<sup>2</sup> Grant MacEwan, . . . *And Mighty Women Too: Stories of Notable Western Canadian Women*, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1975), 137.

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Edition, (New York: Random House Publishers, 2011), 149.

in which the history of feminism has been written.

In the late 1990s, the Government of Canada prepared to unveil a series of commemorative monuments, including statues of the Famous Five, to honour the seventieth anniversary of the Persons Case. The statues were received with great controversy in Alberta; as an editor of the *Calgary Herald* stated on 6 May 1998, “in casting Emily Murphy in stone today, we make history in the present by excusing her racism in order to approve her feminism.”<sup>4</sup> Historians writing on the topic of Canadian eugenics have emphasized the roles played by the Famous Five, but few draw connections to their feminism.<sup>5</sup> The two themes are often represented as a dichotomy, with feminism and eugenic philosophies viewed as ideologically opposite. In addition to being a prominent political figure in equal rights legislation, Murphy was also a vital contributor to programs which sought to improve the human race through the forced sterilization of people deemed “unfit”. Campaigning for the sterilization of young, so-called feeble-minded girls, with the support of her suffragist partner and Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Liberal Party Nellie McClung, Murphy was critical to the passage of formal eugenics legislation in Alberta in 1928.

Emily Murphy represents not only a single controversial figure who is both celebrated and reviled, but also the larger historical gap between the complicated

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Menzies, “It is wrong to excuse Murphy's beliefs about race” in *Calgary Herald* (6 May 1998, pg. A14).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Sheryl N. Hamilton notes that “while Murphy and her colleagues could be recognised as persons in 1929, they could not hope to be heroes in the 2000s” in Sheryl N. Hamilton, *Impersonations: Troubling the Person in Law and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 93.

histories of Western Canadian feminist and eugenic politics. It seems daunting to mitigate these two apparently opposite and counter-intuitive ideologies of first-wave feminism, which fought for women to be considered persons and granted equal rights, and that of eugenics, which called for control of bodies in the strictest sense. Yet narratives of early Canadian feminist movements were directly engaged in concepts of good motherhood, scientific and religious idealism, and an overarching moral philosophy, the same language that is present in eugenic history.

Early feminists often perceived their social pursuits within the context of the broader scientific justification of their moral beliefs. Integrating feminism, gender constructions, and eugenic ideologies, this thesis examines how early conceptions of female power were intrinsically linked to racial, class-based, and even sexist discourses. Joan Scott states that the arguments made by early feminists were paradoxical, and that “in order to protest women's exclusion, they had to act on behalf of women and so invoked the very difference they sought to deny . . . giving it political force”.<sup>6</sup> Rather than being seen as divergent, these concepts can be linked together in a historically coherent way. This thesis provides a challenge to the idea that early feminists were paradoxical, and rather seeks to integrate their emphasis on the privilege of motherhood, hyper-nationalism, and involvement in male political organizations within their broader ideological framework. This ideology which emerged from the cultural history of the Canadian West, and gained political clout during the 1920s was one which both elevated and strictly controlled motherhood within a feminist framework.

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), x-xii.

This project examines the relationship between prominent first-wave feminists, female-led political organizations, and local women's groups in the implementation and on-going support of both the formal Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928 and the eugenics project more broadly in Alberta. As argued by sociologist Jana Grekul, gender became a key variable in the Alberta Eugenics movement.<sup>7</sup> Following the First World War, political expressions of maternal ideologies constructed women as ideal for promoting national peace. It was increasingly believed by agrarian democrats, such as the United Farmers of Alberta, that the maternal nature of women played a decisive role in balancing the destructive male influence and promoting a greater social morality.<sup>8</sup> While Grekul's comprehensive statistical work affirmed that, in its early phases, the eugenics program targeted mainly women for sexual sterilization, I hope to deepen this interpretation by arguing that the eugenics project in Western Canada not only targeted women as victims, but also as the ideal promoters of national social health. In other words, notions of femininity and motherhood were central features of nation-building discourses in the interwar period.

What is theoretically unclear is how these seemingly opposing ideologies – the feminist promotion of women's rights and the eugenic suppression of women's control over their own bodies – were constructed together. Often, as the Murphy example shows, these ideologies have been identified as divergent, and any negative aspects of the

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<sup>7</sup> Jana Grekul, "Sterilization in Alberta, 1928 to 1972: Gender Matters," in *Canadian Review of Sociology* (Vol. 45, No. 3, 2008), 257-263.

<sup>8</sup> See Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), for the development of this argument.

feminist legacy, if mentioned, are not analysed but rather deemed to be outside of the women's sphere, representing instead aspects of the patriarchal realm of men. Unlike existing historical literature on the Western Canadian eugenics program, which does not intersect comfortably with the history of the feminist social movement, this thesis situates the ideology of Western Canadian feminist eugenic policies within a complex analysis of maternalism, science, health, class, and geography.

Frances Galton, dubbed the “father of eugenics,” developed a philosophical framework for human heredity in his text *Hereditary Genius* in 1869, and formally coined the term eugenics in 1883. He drew his etymology from the Greek *eugenes*, to describe being good in stock or those “hereditarily endowed with noble qualities . . . equally applicable to men, brutes, and plants.”<sup>9</sup> Galton’s ideas permeated genetic theory and social reform agendas throughout the Western world, and garnered diverse support.<sup>10</sup> The political movement of eugenics was a response to a widespread fear in Europe and North America of the degeneration of society. In Britain, the Eugenics Education Society was formed in 1907, and the first eugenics law was passed in 1913.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, Indiana was the first state to pass a formal sterilization law in 1907, and, by 1927, fifteen other states had passed similar laws. While British eugenic thought tended to

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (New York: MacMillan, 1883), 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> See Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> The Mental Deficiency Act was passed in 1913 and made provisions for the institutional separation of people deemed “feeble minded” or “moral defectives” from the ranks of the poor. See Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*; Ann Farmer *By Their Fruits: Eugenics, Population Control, and the Abortion Campaign*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), McLaren (1990).

focus on issues of class, the American eugenicists tended to be more racially driven.<sup>12</sup> Both the American and British reformers who advocated for formal eugenic legislation were responding to a broader anxiety over the potential degeneration of the “race”, defined in either economic or class, ethnic, racial, and nationalistic/imperialistic terms.

Canadians also embraced eugenics. As stated by Angus McLaren in his seminal text on eugenics in Canada, the nation was not immune to the eugenic preoccupations of its neighbours.<sup>13</sup> Support for the eugenics movement in Alberta drew from broader Canadian and international medical understandings of heredity, and a broader belief that social problems could be solved with medical intervention. Canadian eugenic thought merged the British and American ideals, and focused both on the debilitating effects of poverty and a fear of “defective immigrants.” Responding to these concerns, upon recommendation by the United Farm Women of Alberta, the United Farmers of Alberta passed the *Sexual Sterilization Act* on 21 March 1928. The first of two provinces to introduce a formal sterilization programme, the *Sexual Sterilization Act* created a four-person Eugenics Board, which was charged with the examination of patients in mental institutions and authorized “surgical operation for sexual sterilization,” with the consent of the patient or their guardian.<sup>14</sup> Concerned with the “risk of multiplication,” and the “transmission of disability to progeny,” the Eugenics Board authorized the sterilization of over 2800 people between 1928 and 1972. In 1937, under a new government led by the

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<sup>12</sup> See McLaren, *Our Own Master Race*.

<sup>13</sup> See Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), 9.

<sup>14</sup> “The Sexual Sterilization Act,” Article 37, Statutes of the Province of Alberta, The Alberta Law Collection Fonds, University of Calgary Archives.

Social Credit Party, the Act was amended in an effort to speed up the process by removing the need for consent from individuals with low intelligence quotients. This revised law made Alberta distinctive in its approach to eugenics.

The historiography on eugenics has a broad range in scope and focus, which includes scientific, social, and cultural histories. Traditionally, historians who have focused on the North American eugenics project tend to link eugenic policies to modern genetics within a national scope and, prior to the 1980s, historical texts on eugenic history tended to draw comparisons to the German eugenics programs of the Second World War. In 1985, Daniel J. Kevles, renowned historian of science at Yale University, became well known for his survey work on American eugenic history, *In the Name of Eugenics*. He describes the book as the first historical account of the development of eugenics in a comparative context from origins in the late nineteenth century to gene therapy of the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Despite his claims of being the first historian to do so in a comprehensive way, Kevles was part of a larger trend in American and British scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s to map the development of the Anglo-American

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<sup>15</sup>Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Heredity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1985), x.



eugenics movement.<sup>16</sup> His text is primarily biographical in nature, making it unique in its use of psychoanalysis as a method of historical interrogation as he searched for links between individual histories as motivations for the larger movements.

Kevles' research traces similarities and differences between eugenic programs in the United States and Great Britain, and he questions why the racially-based American programs were successful in their implementation whereas the class-based British programs did not get past their planning stages. He presents a minimal gendered element, acknowledging that half of the memberships and a quarter of the officerships of the British Eugenics Society consisted of women, and that in the United States “women constituted a large part of the eugenics audience.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Kevles' work on individual motivation in history tends to border on “great man” history, focusing little on women's contributions or on the complicated social origins of eugenics.

Historical scholarship on the topic of eugenics continued with a primary focus on the British or American programs, and did not draw the interest of Canadian scholars until the 1990s. In *Our Own Master Race*, Angus McLaren argues that the wide

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<sup>16</sup> Scholars have criticised Kevles' claim to be the first of such historic scholarship, and pointed to other works on similar themes such as; Jeffrey M. Blum *Pseudoscience and Mental Ability* (1978), Allan Chase *The Legacy of Malthus* (1977), Thomas F. Gossett *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (1963), Stephen J. Gould *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), Mark Haller *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (1963), Clarence J. Karier *Shaping of the American Educational State* (1975), James M. Lawler *IQ, Heritability, and Racism* (1978), Kenneth Ludmerer *Genetics and American Society* (1972), Russell Marks *The Idea of I.Q.* (1981), Donald K. Pickens *Eugenics and the Progressives* (1968), Cynthia Russett *Darwin in America* (1976), G. R. Searle *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900-1914* (1976), and J. D. Smith's, *Minds Made Feeble* (1985). However, Kevles' own 25 page “Essay on Sources” within the text point to the wealth of secondary literature available to scholars interested in any of the facets of Eugenic history.

<sup>17</sup> Kevles, 64.

scholarship on American and British examples has drawn attention to racial, class, and ideological based reasons for the development of eugenics programs, but also led to the imaginings of most Canadians “that their country was spared the virulent racism and class consciousness of its neighbours.”<sup>18</sup> McLaren provides a Canadian social history of eugenics, strengthened through his utilization of a socio-cultural perspective rather than presenting the movement as merely intellectual or class-based. In this innovative study, McLaren compensated for the absence of historical scholarship on the Canadian eugenics project.

McLaren presents the role of feminists in the Canadian eugenic movement in a limited but coherent way. His emphasis on the cultural focus of maternal feminism, where constructions of motherhood are an important factor for analysis, rather than the views espoused by scholars such as Kevles, which represent women solely on the basis of their biological role. McLaren not only outlines the involvement of individual feminists, such as Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy, but also of larger organizations such as the United Farm Women of Alberta. In order to understand why these feminist women supported policies that limited the rights of individuals deemed feeble-minded, he argues that “one recalls the ethos of the early women's movement. It was very much marked by what has been called an ideology of 'maternal feminism.' Women demanded the vote so that they could more adequately defend their homes and children.”<sup>19</sup> McLaren links women to the eugenics movement through their reproductive capabilities. By equating

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<sup>18</sup>Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), 9.

<sup>19</sup>McLaren, 93-94.

first-wave feminism with the maternal, McLaren develops the common criticism that the very nature of early feminist moments, which argues that these women failed to create any fundamental changes in society and the apparent contradictions, represent a lesser or even non-feminist ideology. Indeed, defenders of the early feminists argue that the contexts of maternal feminism are often overlooked, and the lived experiences of these women provide the insight into the complicated ideologies, particularly in terms of the gendered culture surrounding women's clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>20</sup>

Within his study, McLaren also demonstrated that “there was . . . an obvious anti-feminist element in eugenics . . . woman's role was determined by her reproductive function. Biology, not politics, subjected her to man.”<sup>21</sup> Despite being a comprehensive and useful analysis of the eugenics movement in Canada, McLaren's justifications for feminist involvement in the eugenics movement – that of maternal feminism, or the idea that the public sphere would benefit from the involvement of women, and that of ignorance, certainly reinforcing the irrationality of women's involvement – are not sufficient. He lacks a historical development of agrarian feminism, and does not provide any examples of how these women would have “irrationally” viewed the movement for sterilization. McLaren's broad national eugenic histories have analysed the role of gender in a limited fashion, acknowledging individual women's participation but not including their roles as feminists or considering how feminism itself may have influenced

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<sup>20</sup>Marene LeGates, *In Their Time: A History of Western Feminism*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 247.

<sup>21</sup>McLaren, 20. Also, Edward Shorter provides a more comprehensive development of this argument in *A History of Women's Bodies* (1990).

their support for the movement.

Outside of studies which analyse victims,<sup>22</sup> eugenic histories generally minimize the role of gender, emphasizing the disagreement between feminist ideologies and eugenic actions while making little attempt to mitigate the seemingly contradictory nature of this relationship. Providing a literary review of Nellie McClung's writings, Cecily Devereaux analyses the tropes present in McClung's written works. Noting the historiographical divide between the different waves of feminist scholarship, Devereaux argues that “the disjunctions between early twentieth-century social reform feminism and later twentieth-century feminist politics continue to need more scholarly analysis if they are to be understood.”<sup>23</sup> She states that contemporary feminist scholarship tends to rupture from its own history, judging early feminists by modern standards and refuting their categorization as feminist. Though Devereaux admits to raising more questions than she answers through her literary study of McClung, she provides an important framework from which to begin an analysis of feminist involvement in eugenics.

Devereaux suggests that organized rural women represented a radical form of maternal feminism which did not differ notably from the majority of first wave feminists<sup>24</sup>. Rather, she argued that the feminists used a gendered construction of women

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<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive statistical survey of the gender of victims of Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act, see Jana Grekul, “Sterilization in Alberta, 1928-1972: Gender Matters,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology*, Vol. 45, No.3, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Cecily Devereaux, *Growing A Race: Nellie L. McClung & the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>24</sup> See also Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early feminists*, (New York: The New Press, 1995). Bland argues that eugenics appealed to women because of the opportunity to be morally superior. She argues that the credibility of an authoritarian scientific validation of the superior position of middle and upper class Anglo-Saxon was appealing as it further uplifted the social status of those women.

as morally superior to justify the vote, and that justification also fit into the popular construction of women as mothers of the race. Merging equal rights and maternal feminist arguments, this definition of radical maternalism constructs women's liberation as central to the providing an opportunity for women to create radical social change.<sup>25</sup> Devereaux's study connects contemporary feminist scholarship with early feminist discourse, arguing that contemporary Canadians “embrace or reject figures such as McClung, apparently endorsing or opposing her politics of race *or* her politics of gender, but not functionalizing the two together.”<sup>26</sup> Expanding on earlier feminist approaches to history which sought to view women's stories as representative of a common identity – whereby the category of woman is deemed to be universal and united as an object of inquiry – women's involvement in eugenic policies creates a need for more complex perspectives on gender beyond explanations which simply equate gender with female involvement. However, her study lacks a focus on the role of broader agrarian factors in the development of the particular agrarian feminism developed by farm women across Canada. Building on Seymour Lipset's *Agrarian Socialism*, both Georgina Taylor and Louise Carbert have attempted to reconcile some of these broader historiographical debates by situating feminism within the aggressive agrarian movement which swept across the Canadian prairies in the early twentieth century.

Taylor has presented the most comprehensive and inclusive definition of the feminism of farm women in her dissertation on Violet McNaughton's contributions to

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<sup>25</sup>Cecily Devereaux, *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>26</sup>Original emphasis. Devereaux, 15.

Saskatchewan. McNaughton, a leader of the Women Grain Growers in Saskatchewan, was a key figure in Saskatchewan's women's suffrage movement, public health movement, and was widely influential in the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association. Taylor argues that the debate between equal rights and maternal feminism is insufficient to explain the role of what she terms agrarian feminism in western Canada. She adds five additional elements which define agrarian feminism of the prairies, arguing that McNaughton's feminism promoted the recognition of the partnership between men and women on the farm; encouraged farm women to negotiate the conditions of their productive, reproductive and community work in order to improve these conditions; aimed at improving conditions in which farm people as a class worked and lived; was based on the idea that the First National Policy had to be radically revamped before farm women, their families, and other Canadians could live well; and was aimed at improving the poor living conditions in which farm women and their families lived by using the principles of agrarian co-operation.<sup>27</sup> Taylor's definition of McNaughton's agrarian feminism is where the ideology of feminists in Alberta can also be situated. She defines the feminism of farm women as focusing on the equality between men and women on the farm which encouraged women to negotiate the conditions of their productive, reproductive, and community work.<sup>28</sup>

Nancy Stepan, a historian of science and medicine at Columbia University, draws attention to these complex subtleties of feminist involvement in the eugenic movement in

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<sup>27</sup>Georgina M. Taylor, *'Ground for Common Action': Violet McNaughton's Agrarian Feminism and the Origins of the Farm Women's Movement in Canada*, (Carleton University: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1997), 9-13.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, 9-13.

her 1991 work *The Hour of Eugenics*. Analysing archival materials from Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, she argues that eugenics is complicated by larger themes of modern history, “such as nationalism, racism, sexuality and gender, social hygiene, and the development of modern eugenics itself.”<sup>29</sup> She also states that the historiographical dominance of the American, British, and German eugenics programs have ignored the orientations of several other nations. The complicated but comprehensive argument that emerges from her work, similar to Jana Grekul's approach, is that gender was central to discourses of eugenics, with gender being defined not by women or the feminine, but rather as Joan Scott describes. That is, gender represents the constructed subjective and collective meanings of feminine and masculine as constructed categories of identity. To that end, Stepan states that:

To some historians, eugenics was by definition an anti-feminist, conservative movement, because it aimed to control sexuality and confine women to a reproductive-maternal role. Others, looking at the eugenicists' promotion of maternal and infant health care, sexual hygiene, and sexual education, emphasize the appeal of eugenics to reformists and the left; they suggest that in its day eugenics was a progressive force, even at times protofeminist.<sup>30</sup>

What is important to Stepan's analysis is that 'woman' is not seen as a universal category, beginning an analysis of how “eugenic policies in reproduction reflected the divisions and contradictions within gender and within social life.”<sup>31</sup> The complicated feminist movement both challenged and reinforced traditional women's roles in society, and Stepan constructs this relationship as a sophisticated interplay of intellectual history,

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<sup>29</sup>Nancy Leys Stepan, “*The Hour of Eugenics*”: *Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>30</sup>Stepan, 103-104.

<sup>31</sup>Stepan, 104.

social relations, and individual lived experiences, a perspective lacking in earlier works.

Since the 1990s, several feminist histories have come closer to this analysis through the historical understanding of constructions of good and bad motherhood. Providing a feminist history of mother-blaming in America, Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky's twenty-six article anthology "*Bad Mothers*": *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America* provides a detailed analysis of how bad motherhood has been constructed in opposition to ideal womanhood since the Victorian era. The authors call this new ideal "scientific motherhood," and define it as "scientific knowledge (usually provided by men) combined with women's mother-love to form the ingredients necessary for successful childrearing in the modern age."<sup>32</sup> Though their text has no direct references to the eugenics movement in America, Ladd-Taylor and Umansky provide a comprehensive analysis of evolutionary theory and constructions of motherhood. They indicate that in the early twentieth century, good and bad motherhoods were constructed in terms of racial hierarchy despite the fact that the ideology of feminist maternalism was intended to unite women beyond race or class. Making similar arguments to those outlined by McLaren, Ladd-Taylor and Umansky argue that women who were defined as being of "superior stock" were responsible for not only their own families, but for the future of the race. As such, the science of good motherhood necessarily reinforced the category of bad motherhood alongside it. The pseudo-scientific category of "feeble-minded" was thus also a construction of what a good mother was not. The anthology enriches the scholarly understanding of how the complicated middle-class standards of

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<sup>32</sup>Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, "*Bad*" *Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 11.



mothering and gender standards are historically constructed.

Expansions on the complicated nature of the feminist history of women's involvement in the eugenics movement can also be found in women's studies. British cultural sociologist Lucy Bland distinguishes herself in her attempt to emphasize, rather than minimize, the seemingly contradictory nature of feminist social politics. In her introduction, she argues that “feminist politics were complex, contradictory, and not easily compartmentalized into two opposing camps.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike earlier theorists, she states that early feminism was conflicted, wavering between progress and regression of women's rights. In a chapter entirely dedicated to feminism within the eugenics movement in Britain she argues, as did Kevles, that women represented a majority in the Eugenics Society Council. However, unlike Kevles Bland expands upon *why* women were attracted to eugenics, and outlines her position mainly in moral terms. Additionally, her emphasis on the involvement of feminists in both positive and negative eugenic politics discounts earlier historical constructions of women as ignorant and passive followers of this dominating social ideology.

A number of historical texts have been written since 2005 which attempt to amalgamate the histories of the sterilization, global fertility, and feminist movements in a comprehensive way. Acknowledging that the inclusion of gender and sexuality to the analysis of eugenics has illustrated the grey areas of reproductive politics,<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern's *Eugenic Nation* adds further depth to this field of inquiry by including

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<sup>33</sup>Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), xix.

<sup>34</sup>Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, (London: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

geography as an analytical lens. Stating that the American historiography of eugenics is East-coast centric, she examines California, and questions how geography may have played into why that state performed one third of all eugenic sterilizations in the nation.<sup>35</sup> Minna Stern argues that individuals such as Margaret Sanger have been described by other historians as either racist eugenicists or misguided feminists, causing “a tendency to depict eugenics in black and white has elided uncomfortable nuances. . . [and] much of the history of sterilization needs to be considered a fractious interplay between diverse feminist groups, those sterilized, physicians, the welfare bureaucracy, and eugenicists.”<sup>36</sup> The study brings forth those serious issues of gender and sexuality in policies of eugenics and shows how a geographical element plays into the construction of those identities. Region became an important variable in the rise of the agrarian politics in Alberta which would promote eugenic legislation.

In Alberta during the rise of the United Farm movement, geography created a unique identity for farmers, as agrarian democracy directly connected land and politics. Sarah Carter's edited anthology of academic papers and research presented at a University of Calgary conference, *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History*, includes several sections that seek to reveal the “connection between gender, place and the processes that shaped the diversity of women's experience in the Canadian West”.<sup>37</sup> Within the anthology, Nadine Kozak discusses the influence of Joan

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<sup>35</sup>Minna Stern, 6.

<sup>36</sup>Minna Stern, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith, *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West Through Women's History*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 2.

Scott on women's history, and responds with her article, “Advice Ideals and Rural Prairie Realities”, arguing that there is an interplay of gender and region in rural women's responses to motherhood advice.<sup>38</sup> She believed that the explosion of child-rearing literature and corresponding development of a science of motherhood was interrupted by the health and population concerns that followed the First World War, constructing an ideal of mothers as “holding the nation's hopes in their hands.”<sup>39</sup> The text focuses primarily on positive eugenics, policies which encouraged the reproduction of those members of society deemed fit or ideal, though neither Carter nor Kozak address it as such. Utilizing motherhood literature that was prolific in Western Canadian homes during the interwar period as a basis for analysis, Kozak defines how these texts influenced the lives of individual rural mothers. This so-called expert literature redefined the traditional role of motherhood expertise, which in turn created new methods of defining “good” motherhood.

The problems and concepts of the existing historiography culminated in a recent work that takes gender and sexuality as the central focus of historical analysis and highlights not only femininity but also masculinity. Challenging notions that eugenics was either unilateral or conservative, Wendy Kline shows in *Building a Better Race* that “though several historians recognize the importance of sexuality and gender to the eugenics movement, they limit their analysis to the role of women in the movement.

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<sup>38</sup>Nadine I. Kozak, “Advice Ideals and Rural Prairie Realities: National and Prairie Scientific Motherhood Advice, 1920-29” in *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West Through Women's History*, ed. Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 179-180.

<sup>39</sup>Kozak, 182.

Indeed, too often, *gender* has merely become a synonym for *women*.<sup>40</sup> Kline provides a particularly persuasive argument that eugenics has profoundly influenced contemporary American gender norms through a continuous evolution of constructions of motherhood and family. Indeed, while most historians assume an end to the eugenics movement during the Second World War, Klein argues that the movement merely shifted focus from heredity to maternal care, which only served to strengthen the positive eugenics movement.<sup>41</sup> Kline's primary source research into the backgrounds of individual feminists, important court cases, local women's organizations, women's periodicals, and engagement with the secondary source historiography provides an excellent framework for a study of gender and eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century.

My study picks up on Kline's approach, and discusses how the eugenics project in Western Canada, which in its earliest stages targeted mainly targeted women, was actively endorsed and pursued by feminists and women's organizations. The women involved in supporting eugenics played a direct role in the creation of their own sphere of political influence in Alberta, but in so doing also created a category of oppression of other women's bodies along both class and ethnic lines. I have analysed the role of agrarianism and class in the development of the Western Canadian feminist movement, which influenced other female-led Canadian women's organizations at the time, including initiatives of local United Farm Women and Alberta Federation of Women initiatives. Historian Bradford Rennie warns that although the legacy of these women may appear

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<sup>40</sup>Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*, (London: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>41</sup>Kline, 100.

contradictory, complicated, or naïve, the “traditionally negative or vague impression of the writings of intelligent and earnest farmers should alert us that we are not quite 'getting' their 'foreign system of meaning'.”<sup>42</sup> Through an analysis of Emily Murphy as the leader of the feminist eugenic movement in Alberta, I take individual motivations into account. This general historiography shows that a purely biographical analysis of individuals cannot provide a comprehensive picture of women's involvement in the movement.

This thesis also includes an analysis of female-led eugenic social movements through archival research into the United Farm Women of Alberta and Alberta Federation of Women, to achieve a deeper understanding of how contemporary ideas about class, health, and motherhood played into the more formal structures of feminist support, and how their maternal eugenic feminism shifted from the inter-war to post-Second World War. I maintain a particular focus on the farm movement culture of Alberta, which contributed to the involvement of women in farmers' movements, one which eventually led to larger coalitions, such as the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA). What these organizations ultimately achieved was an allowance for rural women to not only combat their geographical and social isolation, but to secure a more empowered role in society. Ultimately, I argue that women in Alberta produced an ideology of Western Canadian feminist eugenics through a complex mixture of maternal authority, science, health, nationalism, and agrarianism.

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<sup>42</sup>Rennie, 7.

This study analyses the role of women in the development of Western-Canadian eugenics as part of a broader agrarian political movement in Alberta during the early twentieth century. In questioning the complex relationship between the rise of the first-wave feminist movement and eugenics, this thesis tracks the growth of women's political activity in Alberta. As indicated in the preceding literature review, few secondary sources address the topic of women's involvement in eugenics within a Canadian perspective. As a result, my research relied heavily on primary sources which documented women's political activity. Of particular value to this study are the comprehensive records of the United Farm Women of Alberta. Though these records outline the political resolutions drafted by the organization, which are of great value to my argument, the archive also includes full drafts of speeches, internal debates, letters from influential women across Canada, and training manuals. This diversity of materials provides a broad understanding of the values and interests of these women. Blending their literary, cultural, and political interests creates a much more comprehensive understanding of in what ways they constructed their own political and social role in the province.

This study also focuses on the involvement of women within the United Farmers of Alberta proper. The UFA records may seem, at least initially, as not fitting in to a feminist mandate. However, these records provide more than a superficial perspective of how the paternal organization viewed women. Women involved in the UFWA were invited to participate actively in meetings, give speeches, and introduce resolutions to the organization. Also, after 1912, members of the executive of the UFWA became

concurrent members of the UFA executive. As fully a third of UFA reforms were drafted by female members, the UFA records are equally important to this study. In order to form an inclusive representation of women's role in Albertan political life, I have also recognized that the UFA and UFWA were not the only outlets for women's political authority. My research also included the Alberta Child and Family Welfare funds, records of members of the Famous Five, and newspaper clippings. Initially supplementary, I found that these sources were particularly useful to show how the ideas of politicized farm women permeated society writ large.

The first chapter of provides a background of the ideological foundations of the agrarian feminist movement in Alberta. During the foundational years, the province of was promoted as a potential site for the rebuilding and rejuvenating of the health and spirit of men and women who were growing "soft" by urban life. The hard work of both men and women alongside each other developed further the idea that individual labour was vital to the building of the new nation. Within that conceptualization arose the notion that men and women of the west were key to the economical but also physical production and wealth of the nation. Considered equal partners in homestead life, both men and women associated with the United Farmers movement petitioned the government to promote equal suffrage rights for women. However, the organized women in Alberta saw this right simply as an extension of their broader authority in the province. Specifically, it is in this early period before the vote in which women constructed their role as mothers of the nation. I argue that this maternal ideology merged with agrarian politics, and formed the basis for the political ideologies they would develop after 1921.

This chapter provides a deeper understanding of how maternal ideologies, first-wave feminism, constructions of social health, class, and eugenics were constructed together in order to elevate the roles of women in the province.

The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) fundamentally shaped Alberta's political and social culture during both the First World War and interwar period, culminating in the development of co-operatives, women's rights, and comprehensive social legislation, all of which stemmed from and led to a strong sense of community.<sup>43</sup> Women, according to the UFA, possessed a maternal ideology that would balance the destructive male influence by mothering the war-torn nation and promoting a strong moral and social ethic. As such, women were invited to be equal members in the UFA in 1913 with the mandate to “provide for farm women a social centre where she may meet her neighbours and enjoy an exchange of idea in matters of interest.”<sup>44</sup> By 1916 the newly emerged United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) had struck its first three committees later focussed all future endeavours of the group – health, education, and social welfare. These topics were not the priorities of men, but rather were perceived by both the women and men of the UFA/UFWA as areas in which women showed expertise.

Within the second chapter, I trace the politics of farm women after the success of the franchise. Rather than an end in itself, these women saw the vote as recognition of a greater need for women in politics on the part of the provincial government. As their political power became further institutionalized, the maternalist language of those farm

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<sup>43</sup>Rennie, 4-7.

<sup>44</sup>“Mandate of the UFWA,” as found in Langford, Nanci L., *Politics, Pitchforks, and Pickle Jars: 75 Years of Organized Farm Women in Alberta*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1997.



women was also moved into politics. In the 1920s, women's political authority was primarily located in the areas of social services, education and health. Within the construction of women's roles as national mothers, the UFWA promoted social improvement through motherhood and a dedication to public health. Women aggressively petitioned the provincial government for health education and reform. Considering the physical and ideological connections between maternal and national health, these women felt it was their duty to promote an intelligent motherhood.

Following the increasing social emphasis on maternal responsibility for family health, reforms in education and health provide an example of the complex interplay between feminism and eugenics. The notions of motherhood promoted by the farm women encouraged women to become educated and informed, while at the same time creating standards of health and degeneration which required surveillance and control. The third chapter provides an analysis of the layers of female expertise that emerged as a result of successful politicking on the part of the UFWA. An increasing social pressure to conform to scientific standards of good motherhood encouraged women to gain education into the emerging sciences of home-making and child-rearing; sciences which have obvious eugenic elements. The emphasis on a controlled home environment reinforced the role of women in the promotion of good motherhood, professionalizing not just homemaking, but nursing and teaching. This control required not only the sterilization of bad mothers, but the examination and control of all women and children. In so doing, early agrarian feminists sought not merely to obtain the vote, or secure their own place in the political hierarchy, but also sought to fundamentally alter the structure of society.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **MOTHERS OF THE NATION: The Evolution of Agrarian Feminism in Alberta**

*“It is good to live in these first days when the foundations of things are being laid, to be able, now and then, to place a stone or carry the mortar to set it good and true.”*

~Emily Murphy

First-wave feminism is a term which was created *ex post facto* by second-wave feminists in the 1960s and 1970s. Philosophers such as Betty Friedan produced the category in order to distinguish the second-wave feminist movement from the suffrage-based first wave. In 1965, Friedan asserted that feminism was a “dead history” to all women born after 1920. According to her, the end of feminism was met with the winning of the vote.<sup>1</sup> This initial construction of first-wave feminism has permeated the way in which its history has been written, with both the beginning and end of the movement focused on the vote. As female voters did not enter politics in droves or vote consistently as a block, but rather continued to operate primarily in the private sphere, the movement has retroactively been considered a failure. The role of legal equality is thus little more than a formality, and has been constructed as insufficient in the achievement of broader (feminist) social changes.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the historiography has followed this

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Norton Paperback Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 163.

<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Cavanaugh, “Introduction” in *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1993), xvi.

criticism of first-wave feminism. Veronica Strong-Boag argued that while women achieved highly visible “firsts” as political equals, their progress was slow and the 1930s represented an increasing preoccupation with the private realm.<sup>3</sup> Sandra Haarsager further highlights that as women’s clubs in the 1920s began to diminish as a force as women moved away from political action.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the feminists in Alberta throughout the first half of the twentieth century were directly engaged in political life and developed an overarching moral philosophy which engaged in concepts of good motherhood, national, agrarian, scientific, and religious idealism. In a 1928 article “Is Women’s Suffrage a Fizzle?” Anne Anderson Perry wrote that “in Alberta . . . much social legislation has been definitely furthered because of the urge of the women’s vote.”<sup>5</sup> This chapter examines how early conceptions of female power were intrinsically linked to agrarian and nationalist discourses which undergirded the agrarian feminist philosophy in Alberta. I argue that it is this development of agrarian feminism within the rise of agrarian politics in Alberta which situated the future political action of feminists in the province. Just as the work of farm women was necessary for the proper functioning of the farm home, their work came to be equally valued by male farmers within an agrarian political movement. Furthermore, when the

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<sup>3</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919 – 1939*, (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1988), 208.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest 1840-1920*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 334-337.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Anderson Perry, “Is Woman’s Suffrage a Fizzle” in *Maclean’s* (1 February 1928) as cited in Nancy Langford, “‘All That Glitters:’ The Political Apprenticeship of Alberta Women, 1916 – 1930”, in *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1993), 83.

United Farmers of Alberta became politicized, farm women were given equal standing in the province, alongside an opportunity to influence directly the politics of the province and the nation. Constructing both a progressive ideal and the threat of degeneration concurrently, maternal ideologies merged with constructions of social health, agrarian rhetoric, class, and race within the complicated ideology and goals of early prairie feminists. The rhetoric of women's involvement in farm life, agrarian politics, and maternal reform thus provides the necessary connections between eugenics and feminism in Alberta.

The Canadian West represented a potential for a new and rejuvenated society. 1896 to 1905 were formative years for the province of Alberta. During this period, the province experienced seemingly unfettered population and economic growth. The boom atmosphere across the prairies was driven by immigration policies, which directly targeted foreign farmers. The previously developed perception of the prairies as uninhabitable had to be overcome, and expansionists such as Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton sought to reconstruct the prairies as a potential agricultural utopia. Howard Palmer argued that real and imagined expectations about Alberta's potential were only magnified by a booster press.<sup>6</sup> Sifton's immigration policies were aimed at farmers, and his aggressive marketing campaign led Canada's North-West region to be known as the "last best west." Propaganda described the region as striking and bountiful, where individuals were invited to reap its harvests and "become the heirs in possession of one of

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 76.

the most attractive and wealth-bearing portions of the globe.”<sup>7</sup> The optimistic projections of the region, however, stretched beyond extracting wealth from its resources.

Immigrants to the New West were faced with much harsher physical and economic realities than they had been promised by the boosters and propagandists of the late-nineteenth century. As a response, pamphlets and literature espoused the idea that the corrupting forces of modernity could be overcome with hard work and a direct connection to the land. For example, *Homes for Millions* asserted that the Canadian West provided “a more marvellous as well as nobler force than the fabled secret of the philosopher’s stone.”<sup>8</sup> Just as the magical properties of the philosopher’s stone promised a transmutation of base to gold, the prairies promised similarly the perfection of Sifton’s stalwart peasants. However, the ‘magic’ was found in “toil combined with freedom and equality,” and the West became constructed as an opportunity to rebuild the self and the nation from its foundations.<sup>9</sup>

The agrarian myth played an integral role in the creation of the ideal citizen and nation on the prairies. Seemingly accepting the view that urban life was a corrupting force, early manifestations of the agrarian myth as interpreted by women had a specific focus on the connection between geography, work, and value as citizens. Englishwoman Mrs George Cran, in her autobiographical account *A Woman in Canada*, recalled that Canadians tended to disregard her English roots. Mrs Cran recounted an Ontarian farm

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<sup>7</sup>Nicholas Flood Davin, *Homes for Millions: the great Canadian North-West, its resources fully described* (Ottawa: Brown Chamberlin, 1891), 5. Digitized microfilm version, University of Alberta Libraries.

<sup>8</sup> Davin, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Davin, 6.

wife telling her that:

your roads have hedges, and are kept like park-walks; every hill is labelled 'caution'; every turning has a sign-post to tell you which way to go. *Your very roads nurse and pamper the intelligence out of a man.* Why, I'd sooner learn to rely on signs instead of the sun for my direction if I lived there; and I'd forget to shoot if I had your country; every acre of bush has a 'tresspassboard' in it instead of something for the pot. Your country is worn out.<sup>10</sup>

Cran described the very geography of England as enough to corrupt the health and intelligence of the citizens of the nation. An important and interesting perspective of the over-civilized as 'unfit', and the primitive as 'ideal' was central to the identity of this region. If every aspect of English life was corrupting the population, the Canadian West by contrast offered an opportunity for virtuous living. According to Cran and the various farmers she encountered on her tour of western Canada, the difference in ideologies between new Canadians and the old English elite was a matter of perspective. The English were proud of the past, while the Canadians were dedicated to the future.<sup>11</sup>

Emily Murphy similarly connected the idea of the lifestyle of farmers as leading to the future health of the nation. Drawing from the same philosophies of 'fit' and 'unfit' ways of living, she contended in *Janey Canuck in the West* that the women and men of Britain were polished “till all the fibre is rubbed away.”<sup>12</sup> For Murphy and Cran, the

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<sup>10</sup>Emphasis added. Mrs. George Cran, *A Woman in Canada*, (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited, 1910), 12-13.

<sup>11</sup>“See what we have done,” cries the Englishman, and “See what we are going to do,” cries the Canadian!” Mrs. George Cran, *A Woman in Canada*, (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited, 1910), 12.

<sup>12</sup>Emily Ferguson, “Pathfinders,” in *Janey Canuck in the West*, 3d. ed. (London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1910), 119.

nation was a product of individuals. It was not simply the individual who gained strength of character, but hard work became the very fibre of the nation. According to Murphy, the success of the nation required “children will be cast in manly mould.”<sup>13</sup> The labour which was necessary for homestead life Murphy labelled “brutality,” and further stated that it was a “sign of strength and health”.<sup>14</sup> The health, well-being, and strength of character of individual citizens on the Canadian prairies was the backbone of Canada’s future. The consequence of this agrarian ideology that equated the health of the nation with the strength of the individual was that by building the health of the individual, the health of the nation naturally followed.

Historian WL Morton argued that the desire of homesteaders to avoid the poverty of industrial cities and the hope that the Canadian West might be a viable utopia merged with the truth of the hazards of climate and market on homestead life. He identified that

in that tremendous generation of fierce action and hard decisions, the West with heavy strokes forged its own institutions, declared its own identity, and created its own sense of political independence.<sup>15</sup>

Morton argued that Westerners believed they could bring the nation around to their regional perspective through an organized social reform movement. Providing a direct connection between the health of the individual, the land, and the nation, the burgeoning agrarian identity encouraged farmers to organize politically. The idea that farmers were

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<sup>13</sup> “The elemental passions of hunger and love ought to rule in this new Western world—and, in truth, they do.” Emily Ferguson, “Pathfinders,” in *Janey Canuck in the West*, 3d. ed. (London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1910), 119.

<sup>14</sup>Emily Ferguson, *Janey Canuck in the West*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> W.L. Morton, “A Century of Plain and Parkland,” *Alberta Historical Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (Spring 1969), 6-7.

key to national growth became engrained in the agrarian ideology, and provided the energy and drive for the organized farm movement.<sup>16</sup> The early farmers in Western Canada were, by virtue of their hard work and strength, building the future “fibre” of the nation. Avoiding the corrupting influences of urban life through mastery over the land, agriculture was intrinsically linked to national growth. Concepts of self and nation were often constructed synonymously in pamphlets and literature which emphasized that by creating the ideal self, family, and economic unit on the farm, the farmers of Western Canada were necessarily creating a strong nation. The connection between the self and the nation played a particularly critical role in the first period of the farm women's movement in Canada, which Georgina Taylor defined as having its origins between 1909 and 1918.<sup>17</sup>

The construction of agrarianism on the prairies tended to be within a masculine framework. The industrial over-civilization of the urban East and the alienating influences of modern life caused the domestication of the male. Hard work, by contrast, rejuvenated the health and masculinity of both the individual and the nation. However,

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<sup>16</sup>See Bradford James Rennie *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 10, 39-40.

<sup>17</sup>These dates of the 'origins' of the farm women's movement are contested by some historians. In his text *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy* (2000), Bradford Rennie argues that the origins of the (male) agrarian ideology can be found between 1909 and 1913, but also states that the women's movement does not formally begin until 1915. Through Women's Institutes, Temperance Unions, and Homemakers Clubs originated across the prairies as early as 1896, Georgina M. Taylor contests that these organizations touted a different type of feminism which does not fit in her definition of agrarian feminism. She chooses 1909 as the beginning of this thought as it represents the year that Violet McNaughton, the central figure of her case study, immigrates to Western Canada. Considering these parameters, the immigration of future agrarian feminist leaders, and their emergence in political and social activism as the target date, this places the first period of Alberta's farm women's movement somewhere between the immigration of Irene Parlby (1898), Louise McKinney and Henrietta Muir Edwards (1903), Maude Keene Riley (1904), Emily Murphy (1907) and Nellie McClung (1914) and the end of the First World War.



life for women on the prairies was equally harsh and brutal. On her first tour of Alberta, Emily Murphy described her host and hostess in great detail. She found her male host very physically reassuring, describing him as “the real Westerner . . . he is tall, deep chested, and lean in the flank. His body betrays, in every poise and motion, a daily life of activity in the open air.”<sup>18</sup> By contrast, she described her hostess as not bearing the slightest resemblance to a Venus. She goes on to describe her as “deep-chested, iron-muscled, and thickset, like a man.”<sup>19</sup> This masculinized woman represented a burgeoning anxiety over women’s role as equal in farm homesteads. Murphy further described that “it would appear as if the females of all races who are subject to undue physical exercise lose early their picturesqueness, comeliness, and contours. They tend to become asexual and to conform to the physical standard of the males.”<sup>20</sup> The hard work which masculinized the prairies left little allowance for rural women to embrace their womanhood and exist as feminine women.

Murphy's hostess is the consequence of the masculine work ethic on the social development of the prairies. Women were central to building the moral and spiritual backbone of the new nation; however, without any power to do so they were destined to become overtly masculine. The prairies, Murphy believed, needed a unique sort of woman who could perform the physical rigours of homestead work and maintain their civility. Themes of female isolation on the prairies in the early twentieth century have been well documented. Aptly, Eliane Silverman stated that “perhaps the geography

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<sup>18</sup> Emily Ferguson, *Janey Canuck in the West*, 200-201 .

<sup>19</sup> Emily Ferguson, *Janey Canuck in the West*, 200-201.

<sup>20</sup> “As this woman leaned over the swinging cradle and nursed her baby, even her breasts appeared shrunken and flaccid.” Emily Ferguson, *Janey Canuck in the West*, 200.

created the sense of isolation that the women settlers experienced, or maybe the sky intensified their loneliness. . . [but] they began to alter the experience of frontier isolation, turning their loneliness and their need for connections into the beginnings of a culture.”<sup>21</sup> Just as the agrarian ideology was the impetus behind the organization of male farmers around distinctly agrarian values, so too were women aware of the role they had to play on the prairies and in the development of the new nation. Homemakers’ Clubs and Women’s Auxiliaries to farmers’ unions provided a refuge for isolated rural women, and provided a foundation for organized farm women in the province. Women’s organized political involvement not only provided a stronger and larger body of voices in the activism of the agrarian movement in the province, but women by virtue of their sphere of influence sought to alter that movement.

Both men and women shared in the hardships of early homestead life. A woman's role on the prairies was to “help her husband and neighbours transform a barren prairie to a garden spot . . . indicative of civilization” to prevent the “degeneration” of Canada.<sup>22</sup> Women, as civilizers and maintainers of the home, the family, and society, tended to either triumph over the wilderness and maintain their civility or suffer greatly.<sup>23</sup> For women, this reality required them to both rail against civilization and act as a civilizing force in the nation. Women of the Canadian West measured themselves against

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<sup>21</sup>Eliane Silverman, “Our Sky,” in *Women's Changing Landscapes: Life Stories from Three Generations*, Ed. Greta Hoffman Nemiroff and Beth McAuley (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1999), 79.

<sup>22</sup>HG Ahern, “Homesteads for Women,” in *The Grain Growers' Guide* (26 July 1911, page 17), Bruce Peel Special Collections Library (herein after BPSC), University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta. Item Ar01700.

<sup>23</sup>See Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View on Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

“backwards” societies in which women remained simply labourers, but also against those societies that were overly decadent.<sup>24</sup> In an anonymous letter to the *Grain Growers'*

*Guide*, one woman declared

*MOTHERS* – our duty is to take care of the home and the child, but we cannot raise good children unless we can control the conditions surrounding the home. The vote has to do with the cost of living, sanitation, food supply, education, and moral conditions affecting our young people . . . beseech your men to give you the vote to protect the home.<sup>25</sup>

In order to promote progress, and prevent the degeneration of the health, education, morality, and social development of the nation, women required political equality.

Responsible for building the future of the nation, women of the prairies developed a unique ideology that rested between the extremes of civility and savagery (femininity and masculinity).

Men and women, constructed as equal through agrarian organizations were not granted equal political powers. In a 1911 *Grain Growers' Guide*, a farm wife argued that women did not need the ballot, rather the ballot needed women. In a declaration, the *Guide* author asked “are we and our daughters always to be held in the light of imbeciles in this matter of making laws that touches every vital condition under which we live?”<sup>26</sup>

Later that year, the women's page of the *Guide* stated more clearly that “as possible

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<sup>24</sup>Jennifer Henderson, *Settler Feminism and Race Making in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 171.

<sup>25</sup>Original emphasis. “Votes for Women,” *GGG*, 23 August 1911, Page 20. BPSC, Item Ar02000.

<sup>26</sup>“Isobel Graham – Around the Fireside” *GGG*, (February 22, 1911, Page 35), BPSC Item Ar03500.

mothers of a noble race, women are waking to realize their ministry.”<sup>27</sup> In order to be successful, women required political power. Women were “aspiring to economic freedom and political equality that they may fit themselves by fuller development to be the mothers of mankind.”<sup>28</sup> The vote provided a twofold service. On the one hand, the vote was recognition of the moral and civilizing influence of women. On the other hand, the vote was an opportunity to increase the intelligence of women about the home and provide women the capacity to produce more quality children in the future. In both instances, the vote for women was necessary for Canada’s development as a nation.

As early as 1910 the newly emerged United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) offered wives of farmers equal membership rights. Responding to the organization in 1910, Mrs Langston wrote that “I move that we join in one great body of western farm women to study, to learn, our duty and our true places in the development of the west, and in national affairs, regardless of our former education as to the proper place of woman.”<sup>29</sup> To agrarian feminists, the much needed support and recognition of their equality was a part of their pioneering qualities. Women had a clear role to play in the future of the nation. By 1913, the UFA unanimously decided to encourage women to organize under and enjoy all the privileges of the organization.<sup>30</sup> Members of the UFA argued that they had “always considered [women] equal as homebuilders, and they have always borne

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<sup>27</sup> *GGG*, (December 20, 1911, Page 23), BPSC Item Ar02300.

<sup>28</sup> *GGG*, (December 20, 1911, Page 23), BPSC Item Ar02300.

<sup>29</sup> Mrs. L. Langston, “Around the Fireside: Membership for Women,” in *GGG*, (9 March 1910, Page 28) BPSC Item AR02800.

<sup>30</sup> 1914 Minutes and Reports of the Annual General Meeting of the Untied Farmers of Alberta (herein after MRAC), United Farmer of Alberta Fonds (UFAF) Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Series 2 United Farmers of Alberta. - 1909-1966, predominant 1909-1949 Official minutes and reports of the UFA annual conventions. - 1910-1949, MicroUFA.

their share of the hardship of pioneer life.”<sup>31</sup> Since women had shared in the pioneer hardships and experiences and the organization and labour of the farm home, they were certainly entitled to have a political voice.

The work of the mother, both in terms of farm labour as well as the procreative and care-giving force of motherhood gave women a unique role to play in this future of the race. The strength to be found in the west was also a home activity. Much as the individual was constructed as the future of the nation, the family represented the nation writ small. And mothers were key to that family unit. Speaking on behalf of Emily Murphy to the Women of Canada Club in Edmonton in 1912, Mrs Creighton equated raising a family with empire building. The building up of a “true home life” should be done with the good of the nation at heart, as “the home existing for itself alone is barren and sterile.”<sup>32</sup> The women's section of a 1910 *Grain Growers' Guide* stated “as we are judged by the fruits we bear, let us send forth such fruits that there can be no doubt about our being a group of intelligent, race-loving women, always ready to help in the cause of progress.”<sup>33</sup> This connection between progress, child rearing, and nation-building linked the individual and the entire nation to maternity. Children represented the future of the nation, and a good child is necessarily created by a hardy mother, home, and family. Subsequently, a pregnant woman was “a national asset, a national glory, a national

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<sup>31</sup> 1915 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, MicroUFA.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Graham, “In the Realm of Women,” in *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 17 September 1912 (Morning Edition), Page 3, BPSC Item Ar00304.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Louise Langston, “Membership for Women in the Grain Growers Association, *GGG* (16 March 1910), BPSC, Page 28, Item Ar02800.

responsibility.”<sup>34</sup> Progress depended upon a strong mother figure – not simply for the physical future of the race, but for its intellectual and moral future as well.

The United Farmers of Alberta called for women's suffrage both provincially and nationally in 1914, rights which would be recognized in the province in 1916 and the nation in 1918. Considered equal to men in the West because of their shared labour in the difficulties of homesteading, women of the prairies naturally expected the men of the West to support this endeavour. At a 1912 rally, Nellie McClung declared that over fifty per cent of Canada's problems required women's voices to help create a balance between masculine and feminine legislative interests. She called upon men of the West to lead this movement and questioned “why should politics defile women? They have cleaned up every other department of life on which they have entered, and when they get into politics they will clean them up also.”<sup>35</sup> According to McClung, for Canada to be a progressive nation, it required the civilizing influence of women. In 1914 both the UFA and the UFWA declared that extending the franchise to women would make Canada one of the most progressive nations in the world.<sup>36</sup> That same year they unanimously resolved that “this convention of the UFA demands that both the Dominion and the Provincial Parliaments extend the franchise to women on the same basis of men.”<sup>37</sup>

“Let the Women Vote” became a regular piece in the *Grain Growers' Guide* as early as 1912, and explicitly outlined the stance of the organized agrarian politicians

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<sup>34</sup>Mrs. George Cran, *A Woman in Canada*, (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited, 1910), 119.

<sup>35</sup> Nellie McClung, “Why Women Should Vote,” in *GGG*, May 22, 1912, Page 27, BPSC Item Ar02700.

<sup>36</sup> 1914 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, MicroUFA.

<sup>37</sup> 1914 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, MicroUFA.

across the prairies on women's suffrage. Manitoba Member of the Provincial Parliament Fred Dixon pointed out the direct contradictions between the ways women were expected to work in the home and expected to behave in public, the way they were treated by men, and the flippant attitude garnered toward them by politicians. By 1915, he equated womanhood with servitude.<sup>38</sup> "Home is the origin and basis of our civilization," he wrote more directly of the contradiction, "we entrust and enthrone women there [in the home] as wives and mothers, and then refuse these queens of the home a voice in public affairs."<sup>39</sup> For Dixon and other labour and agrarian leaders in the prairie provinces, the agrarian movement was the only way in which true equality would be reached. The *Grain Growers' Guide* emphasized that the woman's movement was part of the great agrarian movement forward, and any opposition to the equal status of women was "between those who believe the people should be ruled and those who believe the people should rule."<sup>40</sup> Progressive politics required the equal voice of women not simply to bolster their own numbers and add weight to the larger farm movement, but to forge a new political identity which focused on unifying the diverse interests of farmers.

The women's movement in Alberta was more than simply the garnering of political equality. The vote represented an opportunity for women to actively pursue those political issues that were not the focus of men. In a 1915 letter to fellow health activist Maude Riley, Emily Murphy stated that "we are all very pleased about your

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<sup>38</sup> FJ Dixon, "Let the Women Vote," in *GGG* (26 May 1915, page 7), BPSC Item Ar00700.

<sup>39</sup> Dixon, "Let the Women Vote," in *GGG* (26 May 1915, page 7), BPSC Item Ar00700.

<sup>40</sup> FJ Dixon, "Let the Women Vote."

getting the suffrage at Calgary, but it was a foregone conclusion, once you asked for it.”<sup>41</sup>

These sentiments indicate the ways in which women considered the vote to be an inevitable result of their role in Albertan society. The women's movement was “a movement which aims to unite law with love, forming thereby a system which, for a better name, we may call the scientifically spiritual.”<sup>42</sup> The women involved in politics in Alberta believed that their feminism represented this unification of law and love – with motherhood constructed as the ultimate spiritual and national duty.<sup>43</sup> Serving the nation and race, the mother represented a construction of women as experts in the household, and therefore as having important contributions to make to the nation as well. In order to be successful as experts, however, they also had to merge their expertise with the laws of the province. If social health could be determined through the health of the individual and home, it followed that women, as experts in the home, would be central to that discourse. As the primary agents of reform and regeneration, then, it was not only their political duty to ensure that their needs were met, but a moral and spiritual duty as well. Ignorance and negligence on the part of the mother, conversely, represented a great danger.

Early politicking by women in Alberta was directly related to this spiritual duty,

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<sup>41</sup>Letter from Emily Murphy to Maude Riley, (6 January 1915), Tuberculosis Associations, 1911-1914, Maude and Harold Riley Fonds (hereinafter MHRF), Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M-8401-63.

<sup>42</sup>*The Calgary Club Woman's Blue Book 1915*, (Calgary, AB: Calgary Branch of the Canadian Women's Press Club Publishers, 1915), in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M-8401-56.

<sup>43</sup>In great detail in *Janey Canuck in the West*, Murphy details the “mother-heart of God.” Comparing the comfort of God to that of a mother. A mother has (1) a simple method of instruction. She has (2) a special capacity for attending to hurt hearts. (3) An almost unlimited patience for the erring. . .



and it was often accomplished through involvement with temperance organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union. As Palmer notes, some of the earliest women's clubs in Alberta were apolitical, raising money for charities and hospitals.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, many early feminists in Alberta became involved heavily in promoting reforms to health legislation. Emily Murphy became the first female appointed to the Edmonton Hospital board in 1910, and drew similar connections between health and nation as she had in her literary works. Murphy was also involved in the Sanatorium Committee of the Women's Canada Club in Edmonton and the Alberta Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis alongside fellow activist and future president of Alberta Child and Family Welfare Maude Riley. These women were also actively involved in debates advocating for rural hospitals and municipal health alongside future UFA Health Convenor and UFWA President Irene Parlby.

In their foundational document, the United Farmers of Alberta dedicated themselves “to educate the young men of the nation on their rights, duties, and responsibilities so that they may understand the evil effects of vicious legislation upon their calling.”<sup>45</sup> Concerned with public life and the future of the nation, the United Farmers of Alberta formed in 1909 as a merger between the Canadian Society of Equality and the Alberta Farmers' Association. The goals of the United Farmers of Alberta were to study social questions, and the promotion of legislation to promote the moral,

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<sup>44</sup>Palmer, 178.

<sup>45</sup>United Farmers of Alberta, *Constitution and By-Laws: Adopted by the Convention 14 January 1909*, (Edmonton: Alberta Homestead Print, 1909), BPSC item PEEL 3347.

intellectual, and financial status of farmers.<sup>46</sup> The United Farmers of Alberta was exclusively open to men when it was formed. Drawing from their belief that they were the producers of the wealth of the nation, farmers desired to control social and economic legislation which affected them.

Though women were not originally included in the organization, at the 1912 annual convention it was unanimously voted that:

Whereas the women in the rural homes of Alberta are sharing equally with the men the burden of the struggle for better conditions and equal rights, and; Whereas we believe that under the law our women should enjoy equal privileges with the men; Therefore be it resolved that we believe that the wives and daughters of our farmers should organize locally and provincially along the lines of the UFA for the improvement of rural conditions, morally, intellectually and socially and we would urge all our members to assist in every way the development of such an organization.<sup>47</sup>

Responding to the support from the men's organization, a women's auxiliary was formed in 1914. This recognition represented a declaration of women as equal, and was certainly an important aspect of the agrarian mandate. Struggling against the same physical, political, and economic hardships, women alongside men were needed to fight the capitalists who sought to control their lives. The UFA, however, also recognized a particular need for women beyond their added numbers to the larger agrarian movement. Primarily, that farm women would provide a social benefit to the organization – morally and intellectually.

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<sup>46</sup> See *The Great West* newspaper. – 1909, which consists of the various initial proposals made by the organization during its formative meeting. UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M-1749-8.

<sup>47</sup> 1912 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

Under the guidance of Irene Parlby, the Ladies Auxiliary of the United Farmers of Alberta changed their name to the United Farm Women of Alberta in 1916. At the annual convention, the women simply stated that the name change “explains its meaning to everyone.”<sup>48</sup> Having never supported the initial name of Ladies Auxiliary, in her memoirs Parlby further explained the name shift. “I knew we had many fine women with good brains amongst our farm women and they should have a more independent and bigger part to play than as a mere appendage of the men’s organization, which to me is what the word auxiliary would come to mean.”<sup>49</sup> An example of the growing autonomy of the women’s movement in the province, Parlby believed that this name change “would strengthen both organizations if while each running their own affairs, they could also be more closely integrated by having our Women’s Executive Board given some representation on the men’s board.”<sup>50</sup> Moved by members of the UFA executive, and unanimously carried, the name and status change of the women's section was supported without opposition.

1916 proved to be an important year for organized farm women in Alberta. Irene Parlby was elected president of the organization, and shifted the mandate of the farm women toward a focus on the connections between health, cooperation, and nation building. A British immigrant to the province, Parlby had spent most of her youth in India and was educated in various boarding schools. Described as a “salutary example for exploring imperial sentiment” Parlby had long familial ties to the British military and the

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<sup>48</sup> 1916 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>49</sup> Irene Parlby, “Irene Parlby’s Rambly Memories,” [1963] in Red Deer and District Archives, Parlby Family Fonds, standard number: mg-7-1-2-12.

<sup>50</sup> Irene Parlby, “Irene Parlby’s Rambly Memories.”

English men and women who colonized British possessions overseas.<sup>51</sup> Choosing to migrate to the province after a tour of the West in 1896, Irene married Walter Parlby and together the couple established one of the first ranches in the Alix region of Alberta. Though self-described as a reluctant politician, Parlby flourished and was an accomplished writer and speaker. An avid supporter of the cooperative farm movement, her husband organized the first United Farmers local in Alix in 1909, and Irene came to be instrumental in the formation of early women's auxiliary meetings in 1913.

The overarching vision of the UFWA was a commitment to not only their authority as women or their class-based agrarian values, but also how both of those values merged within a broader goal of national betterment. For women, this included an interest in reforming education, social welfare, and health, all within a construction of national progress. According to Parlby, there were roles for all women within the movement, but “the raising and training of future generations is the most important constructive work that women can engage in.”<sup>52</sup> As Parlby eloquently and famously stated, “woman's most important place will still be, not at the polling booth, or in the Legislature, but in the home as Mother of the Race.”<sup>53</sup> Parlby's statement was not meant to discourage women from taking political action, but instead typifies this relationship of the UFWA to the broader political organization.

In her new role as president of the UFWA, Parlby gave a speech which

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<sup>51</sup> See: Catherine A. Cavanaugh, “Irene Marryat Parlby: An ‘Imperial Daughter’ in the Canadian West, 1896-1934” in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 100-117.

<sup>52</sup> 1917 MRAC, UFAF, in Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA..

<sup>53</sup> 1916 MRAC, UFAF Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA..

exemplified the ideology of the newly emergent UFWA. She spoke on “woman’s place in the Nation,” and described this topic as vast and important beyond simply a suffrage point of view. Her speech was delivered at the critical point shortly after the emergence of Parlby as president and the UFWA as a powerful body of the UFA, and shortly before the garnering of women’s suffrage in Alberta. Not wishing the UFWA to become ineffectual upon the passage of suffrage legislation, Parlby reminded members at the annual general meeting that the women’s organization alongside the men’s should be striving for increasing the rights of the mother and the home. Reiterating earlier sentiments about the power of women within the home, Parlby reasserted that “as its women are, so will the nation be.”<sup>54</sup> However, in addition to this claim, she explicitly added that “mother and home, the two terms should be synonymous.”<sup>55</sup> For the women of the United Farm Women of Alberta, suffrage was not an end in itself, but represented the recognition that the mother/home was critical to the future of the nation.

The vote was certainly an important step in the politicization of women’s issues in Alberta; however, Parlby’s response reinforces the fact that for the UFWA the vote was not an end in itself.<sup>56</sup> Considering that it was later in the same year that the provincial government endorsed the UFA petition for women’s suffrage, the gentle reminder from Parlby to the women and men of the United Farmers of the wider political goals of the

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<sup>54</sup> Irene Parlby, “Women’s Place in the Nation,” 1916 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>55</sup> Irene Parlby, “Women’s Place in the Nation.”

<sup>56</sup> Parlby is also making a political statement in this speech. Refuting the stance of Nellie McClung who was in 1916, and remained through most of her career, aligned with the Liberal party. McClung argued that while men’s innate destructive element made them successful pioneers able to overcome adversity, it was also the impetus for support for the war and that with the vote, women’s natural moral tendencies would balance out those negative influences.

organization was critical to maintaining its focus and direction. Parlby believed that the attempts to legislate for drunkenness, do away with immorality, and make laws were futile as crime would necessarily increase unless motherhood was raised to a higher standard. The higher standard of motherhood included not only an increase in educated and intelligent parenting, but also a higher standard of living for the mother proper. This included legal rights over property and children, rights to health care, and formal and informal educational reforms. In order to achieve these reforms, it was the duty of “all the true mothers of today” to “see to it that the laws that governed herself or her child should be just and fair.”<sup>57</sup> The “true mother of today” was a modern mother, dedicated to increasing her intelligence by attending child-rearing and homemaking workshops, being a member of her local UFWA, as well as successfully maintaining her home and managing her family.

Alongside the UFA, women interested in being involved in politics focused their future efforts on health, education, and social welfare. What was problematic for these feminist leaders were the very issues which drove their politics – the isolation and lack of education of farm women. Membership waned despite the enthusiasm of the women who were involved in the formation of the UFWA and other organizations. During the First World War, when women organized around war rather than political efforts, the UFA pressured the women's auxiliary to fulfil their goals of recruiting women to the agrarian

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<sup>57</sup> Maude Riley, “The Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed,” in Child Welfare and Milk Campaign Week Handbook, March 1918, in Maude and Harold Riley Fonds – Calgary Children’s Aid Society, 1916-1922, Glenbow Archives, M8401 – File 36.

movement if they were to retain their political relevance.<sup>58</sup> Attempts to pressure women to join the organization and increase overall membership were common, and their rhetoric was one which stressed the duty of women in the agrarian movement. The organizations needed women and, more importantly as their rhetoric dictated, the women needed to be organized.

The language of women involved in health and agrarian reform became increasingly dramatic due to these pressures. Emily Murphy declared in 1914 that “to be worthy of Canada is to be efficient, and to be efficient is to be healthy.”<sup>59</sup> For Murphy, the link between agricultural politics and health was tied to a distinct form of nationalism. As producers of the nation’s wealth, rural Albertans needed to be hard working and efficient. In order to be such, they also needed to be healthy. For the betterment of the nation, health had to become a priority. The alternative, according to health advocates such as Murphy, was to become a province of 'degenerates'. Considering that the wealth of the province was tied to the productivity of farmers – which was necessarily connected to the health of the population – Murphy further declared that “our provincial government takes care to prevent noxious weeds and to generally preserve the wealth of the people within its borders, but take little, if any, thought to preserve the lives of the people.”<sup>60</sup> Describing these actions as a folly on the part of government, Murphy demanded that

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<sup>58</sup>See United Farmers of Alberta Fonds, Official minutes and reports of the UFA annual conventions, Series 2, Glenbow Archives. 1912, 1913, and 1915 UFA AGM minutes discuss this in detail.

<sup>59</sup>Emphasis mine. Emily F. Murphy, “The White Plague in Alberta,” Speech to the Alberta Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, (17 April 1914), MHRE, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M-8698-234.

<sup>60</sup>Emily F. Murphy, “The White Plague in Alberta.”

women become politically active. Considered within the realm of women, Murphy believed that women were required to take charge of the province's health reform in order to prevent this degeneracy.

Health was “a subject of paramount importance, considering that health is an invaluable possession which should be ours and, in view of the fact that in epidemics medical facilities in rural districts proved totally inadequate.”<sup>61</sup> General care and health education were subjects that were discussed as regular talking points for UFWA locals. Included in the scope of “general health,” necessary themes for discussion were listed as municipal hospitals, rural sanitation, tuberculosis and its prevention, medical inspection of schools by public health nurses, home nursing and first aid, child welfare and mothercraft, and how Alberta cared for delinquent and dependent children and mental defectives.<sup>62</sup> These discussions included both the promotion of health through positive reform, such as building hospitals, and the prevention of degeneration and disease by inspecting schools and controlling “mental defectiveness”. What is also important was that the expertise on women's health organizations came not from a doctor, but from public health nurses who were authorities on issues of motherhood health. Through organization and education, women were continuously constructed as experts for both promoting and providing health reform.

What is important to note from this foundational period in the history of the agrarian feminist movement in Alberta is the links made between mother and home,

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<sup>61</sup>“Working Hints for Local Unions of the United Farm Women of Alberta,” [192?] Louise and Russell Johnston Fonds, Archives of the Glenbow Museum File M-08643-38.

<sup>62</sup>“Working Hints for Local Unions of the United Farm Women of Alberta.”



individual and nation, and health and patriotism. These connections formed the basis of the ideologies of organized farm women across Alberta, and drove the politics of the UFWA. The vote represented not a success of this movement, but rather was the point of recognition that politics required women in order for the nation to progress. For women in Alberta, this formal recognition of their value as citizens presented an opportunity to make significant social changes. Mothers of the race was powerful as a metaphorical recognition of women's role in the nation but also represented a link to biology which required mothers to be healthy, well-educated, and recognized as invaluable to the future of the nation. The activism of women in Alberta did not end after their success in obtaining the right to vote or control property in the province. The development of their form of agrarian feminism, which constructed the health of the individual and family as central to the health of the nation, inspired their active advocacy for eugenic reforms which provided for stringent controls over marriage, child rearing, and household sciences. Imbued with a progressive spirit, the organization influenced a number of critical political and social reforms which would shape the history of the province.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **MOTHERS WITH THE VOTE: Promoting Healthy Citizenship through UFWA Agrarian Politics**

*“Each one of us is getting some stone in its place. Are we laying them true and straight, good, honest rock moulded and chiseled with our best endeavor?”<sup>1</sup>*

~Irene Parlby

Though certainly supportive of an equal rights mandate, the United Farm Women of Alberta have been criticized for not representing a specifically feminist political voice due to their close alignment with the male organization.<sup>2</sup> This is mainly due to the seemingly contradictory nature of their politics which both showed concern about women’s issues and had a strong stance on the primacy of motherhood in women’s lives. By aligning themselves with a male dominated political institution and emphasizing gender differences, the UFWA have been largely ignored as an example of feminism. However, for the women involved in the agrarian movement, cooperation provided a greater opportunity for the expression of their interests. UFWA member Helen Ring Robinson declared that cooperation was a wonderful system of living, and that “men and women together find their values increase. Men and women together enact better laws . . . men and women together bring a significance to citizenship that neither can bring

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Parlby, Report from the President (1916) in Minutes of the Annual General Meeting and Convention of the United farmers of Alberta (herein after UFWAMC), UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA..

<sup>2</sup> See Nancy Langford *Politics, Pitchforks and Pickle Jars* (1997), and Bradford Rennie *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy* (2000).

alone.”<sup>3</sup> Bringing their influence as national mothers into the discourse of agrarian politics, the UFWA directly influenced legislation on education, health, young people’s work, immigration, legislation, marketing, peace and arbitration, and social services.

In a 1944 history of the organization, the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) were given credit for “the most advanced piece of legislature ever to be enacted in Alberta.”<sup>4</sup> Not referring to the success in promoting the rights of women through suffrage legislation, rural health reform, or changes to divorce, inheritance, and land rights, the organization was credited with the accomplishment of placing on the statute books the Sexual Sterilization Act in 1928. Within the agrarian construction of national betterment and the role of the individual, anxiety over disease was equivalent to anxiety over national degeneration. According to a women's article in the 1911 *Grain Growers' Guide*, betterment of the nation was the responsibility of the individual. Consequently, careless individuals were a menace to the nation and community. The *Guide* asked of its readers, “Why are men and women so apathetic over the prevalence of disease? . . . Dangers of the present day are not Indians or wild animals, but far greater, and may be summed up in one word, uncleanliness. This is a result of ignorance and laziness.”<sup>5</sup> The pseudo-science of everyday life dominated discussions of health on the prairies. For women, the most efficient way to prevent the degeneration of the home was through the promotion of education and health reform.

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<sup>3</sup> United Farm Women of Alberta. *The UFWA: The Organization for Alberta Farm Women*. (Calgary: United Farm Women of Alberta, 1920) Archives of the Glenbow Museum.

<sup>4</sup>Eva Carter, *Thirty Years of Progress: History of United Farm Women of Alberta* (United Farm Women of Alberta: 1944), 34. UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum.

<sup>5</sup>“Isobel – Around the Fireside” *GGG*, (22 February, 1911, Page 35), BPSC, item Ar03500.

Recognising the connections between eugenics and feminism, this chapter traces the shifting of eugenic feminism within women's organizations in the province. Women involved in the UFWA began as early as 1918 to petition the provincial government for health education and reform, and showed a particular dedication to maternal health. Promoting the need for an educated and intelligent motherhood, the child welfare movement represented a desire to spread intelligence to all mothers to help prevent future degeneracy, often advocating that prevention was cheaper than cure. As prominent American eugenic feminist Margaret Sanger argued, the "co-operation of the awakened mothers of America to counsel and help . . . less fortunate and unenlightened mothers" provided the opportunity "to spread intelligence to all mothers."<sup>6</sup> This cooperation to promote healthy motherhood and childhood is apparent in the development of the women's committees of the United Farmers of Alberta, which focused exclusively on health, education, and social welfare. The flip side to this perspective was that degeneration, through ignorance and laziness, was directly connected to degeneration of the home and nation.

The question of what happened to the women who dominated the suffrage debates in the early twentieth century has been central in histories of Canadian first-wave feminism. Drawing from a historiographical tradition that constructed early rural feminism as an exclusively equal rights mandate, historians have argued that the franchise changed very little for women, and made no noticeable change in women's

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Sanger, "No Healthy Race Without Birth Control", 14 March 1921, in *The Margaret Sanger Papers*, 168. as cited in Mary Ziegler, "Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, the Women's Movement, and the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900-1935," in *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, (Vol 31, 2008).

social status. Catherine Cleverdon described women in the postwar era as being politically apathetic, primarily due to the fact that the suffrage campaign for Alberta women was neither long nor arduous.<sup>7</sup> According to Cleverdon, affiliation with church clubs, social groups, and welfare organizations absorbed the energies of its members and distracted women from the political arena.<sup>8</sup> Carol Lee Bacchi argued that after the vote was obtained, the women's rights reformers became moderate. According to Bacchi, once women's maternal contributions were recognized, women returned to a private sphere.<sup>9</sup> This history of first-wave feminism, which places strong emphasis on the role of the vote, assumed that a return to domesticity necessarily equated to a move away from politics.

More contemporary feminist historians have contested the pejorative connotations of the assumption that women's work was not political. Veronica Strong-Boag has argued that suffrage allowed for the private lives of women to become politicized.<sup>10</sup> Rather a strictly equal rights perspective, which focused on exclusively obtaining the vote, the prairies were dominated by a unique form of maternal feminism. The women in Alberta emphasized the role of women's maternal qualities as the key factor in their politics. Representing a maternalist stance, Strong-Boag emphasized the feminist nature

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, 2d. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 273-276.

<sup>8</sup> Cleverdon, 277.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 143-149.

<sup>10</sup> For this maternal argument, see also: Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939*, (Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1988) and Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

of maternal work, and argued that the political activism of these women can be found in their efforts to reduce women's workloads.<sup>11</sup> However, the ideology of Alberta farm women involved in aggressive agrarian politics further manipulated this maternalism.

Indeed, the role of women involved in agrarian political reform is often ignored or discredited. When women became involved in more extreme political parties, critics argue, they made a choice to privilege their class or ideological interests over their gendered interests.<sup>12</sup> Louise Carbert argued in her text on the politics of Ontario farm women that both equal rights and maternal feminism are insufficient in explaining rural feminist ideals, believing that the key element to an analysis of rural feminism is that these women were part of an aggressive agrarian movement.<sup>13</sup> In a self-published history of the UFWA, member Eva Carter stated that "of our interest in politics it may be justly said that our women particularly became more conscious of the science of good government, and acquired a greater appreciation of the franchise."<sup>14</sup>

Irene Parlby was a critical advocate for women's involvement in the cooperative political movement. She insisted that there was great need to conserve the most valuable resources of the nation, namely children, which "no man, or no woman, who is not a mother can realize it in its entirety."<sup>15</sup> This growing anxiety over the health and welfare

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<sup>11</sup> Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*.

<sup>12</sup> Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Carter, "Thirty Years of Progress," (1944), UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-1749-45.

<sup>15</sup> 1917 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

of women and children became of particular importance as concerns over the war increased. The agrarian-based nationalism which had developed through the early 1910s had become particularly heightened during the First World War. The war served to bolster the social ethic of the United Farmers of Alberta, which emphasized cooperation and social change rather than the privileging of business interests. Both the UFA and the UFWA were openly critical of the “public men” who did not consider the interests of farmers or women in the formation of politics. Members of the UFA considered themselves responsible for the wealth of the nation, and feared that their interests were not being represented by the contemporaneous political parties.

According to both Emily Murphy and the *Grain Growers' Guide* women's pages, the nation could not progress without mothers who were intelligent, powerful, and politically relevant. Referencing the right to vote and the war, United Farm Women's president Irene Parlby attempted to recruit women to the cause by equating their failures to organize or join a local women's auxiliary with a fearful soldier. After receiving the provincial franchise in 1916, the UFWA continued an aggressive recruitment campaign for their organization, on the premise that any woman who enjoyed the right to vote but was not involved in the agrarian movement was “as great a slacker in the cause of progress as the men who hid covered in the hills and forests rather than play their part in the great fight across the seas.”<sup>16</sup> Wartime casualties further emphasized that the job of women was to care for and nurture the nation and race.

Believing that women's voices were required in politics, Parlby argued that the

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<sup>16</sup>Irene Parlby, “Report of UFWA President to UFA” 1919, MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

blood of the nation's sons would not be in vain if the women of Canada brought back "the old stern ideals of duty and self-discipline."<sup>17</sup> The First World War served as the impetus behind a shift in the extreme language and ideologies professed by these women. They believed that the nation was in crisis, and in order to preserve and maintain it, more extreme measures had to be taken. "A mother," in a 1915 copy of the *Grain Growers' Guide* argued that "our children may form immoral habits without being in companionship with the rude and vulgar."<sup>18</sup> Uncleanliness and disease were potential indicators of future physical and moral corruption. She asked of mothers "is it not, therefore, our duty to take great care that there is no physical defect and insist on perfect cleanliness? Then by careful watchfulness and helpful counsel lead our little ones to pure and noble manhood and womanhood."<sup>19</sup> The privilege of the vote came with the responsibility to improve their households and become actively involved in political life.

The UFWA also advocated for the control over degenerate women. Alongside discussions of the need for more nurses in rural areas and the rights of married nurses to resume employment, the National Council of Women and the Provincial Law Committee of the Local Women's councils of Alberta voted in 1917 that 'a great many objections' had been made by men to prevent the progress of women's issues to the detriment of the state.<sup>20</sup> These 'issues' included a demand to control the "menace to the community of

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<sup>17</sup> Irene Parlby, "Women's Place in the Nation," 1916 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA..

<sup>18</sup> A Mother, "Health and Morality," *GGG*, (13 October 1915, P. 10) BPSC, Ar01000.

<sup>19</sup> A Mother, "Health and Morality."

<sup>20</sup> "Out of Town and the Calgary Women," 1917 Provincial Conference Minutes, (22 February 1917) in MHRF, National Council of Women, Provincial Executive, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-8401-62.



mentally defectives.”<sup>21</sup> In 1918 the UFWA presented a petition to the Premier of Alberta which declared that “as the child is the greatest assett [*sic*] to the state, and as it is an established fact that the environment and conditions of home life during childhood permanently affect the future of the child . . . and as the child owes its very existence to the self-sacrifice and suffering of the mother,” several reforms had to be made if the nation was to progress.<sup>22</sup> The financial, social, and physical difficulties of motherhood were constructed as potential issues which would impinge on national progress.

Women who were impoverished due to the death, incapacity, or lack of support from their husbands were the impetus behind a petition for Mother's Pensions and equal custody rights over children. Allowances for mothers, they believed, would prevent mothers from neglecting their children. However, these pensions were not to be bestowed upon all mothers, and were mainly dedicated to widows and women whose husbands had become incapacitated due to the war. In the same document, both the UFWA and Alberta Child and Family Welfare Organization demanded that the laws also become stricter in their dealings with “disorderly houses.” Henrietta Muir Edwards stated that “of their suppression, it is necessary that stricter measures be taken.”<sup>23</sup> Homes which did not fit the ideal of citizenship or threatened the health of the nation needed to be strictly controlled. The UFWA believed that they were instrumental in the battle for

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<sup>21</sup>“Out of Town and the Calgary Women,” Archives of the Glenbow Museum M-8401-62.

<sup>22</sup>Henrietta Muir Edwards and Maude Riley, “Petition to the Honourable, the Premier, and the Members of the Government: the petition to the undersigned representing the members of the various Local Councils of Women of Alberta” (21 March 1918) MHRF National Council of Women, Provincial Executive. Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-8401-62.

<sup>23</sup>Henrietta Muir Edwards and Maude Riley, “Petition to the Honourable, the Premier, and the Members of the Government: the petition to the undersigned representing the members of the various Local Councils of Women of Alberta” Archives of the Glenbow Museum.

progress, and this belief manifested in the declarations and policies of the organization, not merely efforts to recruit more women to the cause. Their politics were centred on this construction of motherhood, and as such demanded legislation which supported progress and combatted degeneration.

Promoting the need for education and rural hospitals enhanced the health of the ideal farm woman and her children, and the UFWA also began to create an idea of the degenerate farm woman and child. The language present in women's literature also shifted in the early 1920s from the promotion of health and nation building, to the prevention of degeneration. In *The Black Candle* (1922), Emily Murphy argued that “wise folk” needed to think about the falling birth rate and the “other scourges” such as illicit drug use and the procreation of less fit members of society.<sup>24</sup> More negative characteristics such as a propensity for poverty, ill health, uncleanliness, ignorance, and laziness were constructed in opposition to the 'ideal'. These degenerating factors served to motivate mothers to dedicate themselves to 'proper' child rearing – an art they could only learn from being affiliated with organizations such as the UFWA, attending conferences and workshops on child and family welfare, reading columns and papers written for women, and generally dedicating themselves to the consumption of motherhood theory. These characteristics were also utilized as a method to gain support for more extreme forms of population controls, including formal and informal eugenics.

In one of her last speeches as president of the organization in 1919, Parlby stated that the reforms that the women were advocating were not looked upon with any favour

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<sup>24</sup>“Janey Canuck,” Emily F. Murphy, *The Black Candle*, (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publisher, 1922), 45-47.

by the Alberta Liberal Party, which had dominated elections since the establishment of the province in 1905. Though they petitioned for educational reform, health inspections, and rural hospitals, the Minister of Health felt that “a considerable amount of education and public opinion would be necessary before legislation such as this could be placed on the statutes.”<sup>25</sup> Parlby argued that although the Government of Alberta was beginning to deal with these problems, the role of the UFWA was “to help form public sentiment and keep on our Department of Health to bring about necessary reform.”<sup>26</sup> The methods which they used to garner public support served a double purpose of educating mothers about both political and national affairs, and also teaching proper expectations of women as mothers. Marion Sears, executive member of the UFWA, argued that women had a “double duty” of using their vote in favour of just laws, and also raising proper children who would be an asset to the state.<sup>27</sup> Sears argued that “since home-making and housekeeping have been our age-long tasks, we are bound to carry the viewpoint which they have given us into outside affairs which affect women and children.”<sup>28</sup> That is to say, more specifically, that ideal womanhood was constructed by the UFWA as necessarily motherhood-centric. Though women had been slow to awaken to their public

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<sup>25</sup>Irene Parlby “Report of the UFWA President to UFA,” 1920, MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum file glen-micro-ufa-1-0667.

<sup>26</sup>Irene Parlby “Report of the UFWA President to UFA,” 1920, MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum file micro-ufa-1-0667.

<sup>27</sup> Marion Sears, “Speech from the UFWA President to the Annual Convention of the UFA,” in the MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA..

<sup>28</sup> Marion Sears, “Speech from the UFWA President to the Annual Convention of the UFA,” (1922).

duties, Sears argued, they would quickly make up for past delinquencies.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, by 1921, a record 309 locals of the United Farm Women of Alberta had been developed across the province. In response to a growing need for a universal organizational structure and educational mandate, the UFWA produced handbooks to assist in the political organization of women's locals across the province. The "Working Hints for Locals" pamphlet outlined why it was important for women to be involved in the broader UFA. Active and educated involvement in the organization, the UFWA believed, would be a benefit to the woman herself, to the community, and the nation.

Specifically, they argued that

it is a benefit to the larger life of the nation through the fact that any stimulation of mental activity brings increased interest in public affairs, and any cooperative effort toward betterment of social, economic, and moral conditions, with its cumulative effect on public opinion, must tend to a reaching out for a higher standard of home, of community, and of national life.<sup>30</sup>

Reiterating their agrarian mandate of equality between men and women on the farm, the handbook specified the need for organized rural women to petition for solutions to the moral and social problems of rural districts. Most progressively in these handbooks, the UFWA promoted the importance of active involvement in politics. By organizing, local women had an opportunity to increase their influence within public affairs, and thus would better serve the nation. Distinct from earlier politics which simply elevated

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<sup>29</sup> Marion Sears, "Speech from the UFWA President to the Annual Convention of the UFA," (1922).

<sup>30</sup> "Working Hints for Local Unions of the United Farm Women of Alberta," [1925?] in Louise and Russel Johnston Fonds, Series 4-a, Constitution, Policy, and Programs of the UFWA, Published histories, organizational manuals, etc. -- [1920s- 1940s]. Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8634 File 38.

women as important to the nation, the UFWA in the early 1920s began to place requirements on that womanhood. In the fight for progress, individual action through education and cooperation had, they believed, a direct result on the future of the community and nation.

In 1920 the UFWA petitioned the provincial government for reforms primarily in the field of public health. The UFA continued to be in full support for the women's group and between 1916 and 1920, over one third of the petitions passed forward to the provincial legislature by the UFA were in the realm of health, education, and social welfare and drafted by the farm women. These resolutions included training for nurses at the expense of the government, courses in first aid nursing for rural girls and women, a clean bill of health before marriage, amendments to the Health Act, increased funding for rural hospitals, and action to deal with "the problem of mental defectives."<sup>31</sup> The majority of these demands centred on the problem that plagued rural mothers, that of isolation and a lack of access to health care. Of these demands, the provincial government had agreed only to the training of a "select few" nurses. Indeed, most of the provincial petitions "were not looked upon by any favour" by the Provincial Government. Rather, the Minister of Health responded to their demands by encouraging the women and men of the UFA to continue educating the public and seeking organizational solutions to the problems.

Not defeated by these failures, Irene Parlby provided innovative solutions to several of the problems the UFWA had outlined. The women had successes in their self-

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<sup>31</sup> Irene Parlby, "Report of UFWA President to UFA," in 1920 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, micro-UFA.

driven programmes, including the advent of junior branches for the training of young people, but often ran into difficulty in their frequent requests for health reforms. In response to the demand for more rural access to health care, Parlby called upon those members of the organization who were trained nurses before their marriage to give lectures and demonstrations throughout the year to the women in their local. These reforms provided a stop-gap measure to fill the need for health care and education in rural Alberta. Not simply a response to the lack of rural health care, retired nurses provided an educated outlet for women in locals, informing them on proper child rearing and homemaking techniques. These nurses were thus critical in providing another opportunity for women to become more knowledgeable on the issues that directly affected them as mothers. Along these lines, Parlby also developed partnerships with women's organizations across the province, particularly the Red Cross, Women's Institute, and Child Welfare Organization to produce and distribute first aid and health information.

The United Farmers entered the political arena in 1919 with hopes of winning a few seats in the provincial legislature in order to more successfully influence provincial legislation. Prior to entering politics, the UFA created a new declaration of principles. They believed that they were a “group of citizens going into political action . . . our aim is to develop through study of social and economic conditions an intelligent responsible citizenship.”<sup>32</sup> Further to this objective, in support of the candidates up for the federal election in 1921, president of the UFA H.W. Wood stated that “we believe, of course,

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<sup>32</sup> Carter, 30-31.

that the weaknesses of the past have been the weaknesses of the people themselves,” but further believed that people were unable to become less weak within the political party system.<sup>33</sup> At the same event, Irene Parlby stated that legislators must possess a breadth of vision “if the country is ever to be brought back to health, is ever to fulfill the promises of her youth.”<sup>34</sup> The form of active citizenship promoted by the UFA and UFWA was not simply one that promoted a reliance on external political experts, but rather one in which political empowerment promised to promote the overall strength of the nation. By politically enfranchising both men and women farmers, they would become more active (and thus intelligent) and therefore healthy citizens.

Much to the surprise of the organization, the UFA won a majority of seats in the 1921 election and formed what would become the longest running agrarian government in the nation.<sup>35</sup> Irene Parlby was elected to represent the Lacombe riding, and in 1921 she would also become the first female cabinet minister in the province. As Minister Without Portfolio, she dedicated herself to those issues which most affected women and children. Within the UFWA she was effectively replaced by two women, Marion Sears who took over her post at the UFWA, and Margaret Gunn, who took over Parlby’s

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<sup>33</sup> Report of Speech Made by Mr . H. W. Wood, President, UFA at the Empress Theatre, Medicine Hat, (25 June 1921). Red Deer and District Archives. Community Fonds, Parlby Family Fonds file m-1157-50.

<sup>34</sup> Speech Delivered by Mrs. Walter Parlby in the Empress Theatre, Medicine Hat, (25 June 1921), at a Meeting Held in Support of Robert Gardiner, UFA Candidate in the Medicine Hat Election. Red Deer and District Archives. Community Fonds, Parlby Family Fonds, file m-1157-50.

<sup>35</sup> The UFA had also made inroads in the 1921 federal election, with two federal seats from Alberta going to the UFA, giving them a voice in both the provincial and federal governments in the early 1920s.

position on the University of Alberta's Board of Governors and was elected vice president of the UFWA. Both women were also members of the UFA Board of Directors, and consequently the UFWA was given a strong voice in both the broader UFA as well as within the provincial legislature.

Building on Parlby's dedication to agrarianism and nation building, Sears and Gunn were primarily interested in hygiene, young people's work, and education. Gunn eventually took over Parlby's post in the University of Alberta's extension division in an effort to further promote education for rural women and youth. After 1920, the UFWA began publishing monthly bulletins on relevant women's topics such as legislation, home economics, cooperation, health, education, political economy, young people's work, horticulture, peace and arbitration, immigration, and social welfare.<sup>36</sup> Margaret Gunn, as convener on education and vice president of the UFWA, staunchly believed that education played an important role in character formation and good citizenship.<sup>37</sup> At the 1922 meeting of the Education Committee, which included the provincial Minister of Education Perren Baker, all parties agreed that "every effort should be made to strengthen the school as a great agent for the development of virtuous, self-reliant citizenship with the right habits and right ideals."<sup>38</sup>

By 1923, when the Women's Institute and Red Cross requested further partnerships with the UFWA, the farm women refused. The UFWA declared that they felt it unwise to align with private organizations when it came to health reform. Health,

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<sup>36</sup> Carter, 28-29.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Gunn, "Report on Education" in 1922 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Gunn, "Report on Education" (1922). .



Sears declared, was the duty of the state.<sup>39</sup> The UFWA no longer felt that partnerships with community organizations were necessary to secure their political success after the 1921 general election. Sears indicated that party politics bestowed upon the UFWA a great responsibility.<sup>40</sup> Women were now able to directly influence and draft legislation without any political barriers due to the politicization of the movement. Not only influencing politics, the UFWA moved their agrarian feminist language into their politics, which promoted the authority of women over social services, health and education. In addition, the institutionalization of women's political power within the province meant that their materialism, which privileged health as key to good citizenship, became the driving force behind their politics.

The 1923 UFWA convenor on health declared that “good health is the first requisite in all around good citizenship. You can't have a hundred per cent efficient mind in a diseased body.”<sup>41</sup> The UFWA continued petitioning the government for increased medical services for rural families, including rural hospitals, public health nurses, and provincially-funded doctors and dentists. Expounding on their belief that health was the duty of the state, the UFWA was also successful in several health reforms after the 1921 election. Minister of Health RG Reid stated that “the control of public health is practically a new sphere of work for the Government of Alberta, but there has

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<sup>39</sup> Marion Sears, “Report of UFWA President to UFA” 1924 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>40</sup> Marion Sears, “Report of UFWA President to UFA” 1922 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>41</sup> Marion Sears, “Report of UFWA President to UFA” 1923 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

been a very rapid growth in the work since its inauguration.”<sup>42</sup> In 1921, shortly after the electoral victory of the UFA, the number of public health nurses in rural Alberta was increased from 6 to 16, and by 1922 there were 21 public health nurses in rural Alberta. Public health nurses, as the epitome of feminine authority, served as key to promoting health in rural Alberta.<sup>43</sup> Responsible for educating the public as well as holding regular health inspections of schools and communities, the public health nurse was ideal for promoting health education. However, these inspections also increased the UFWA’s anxiety over public health. The reports of the nurses, which listed the number of unfit or diseased children, were printed in handbooks and reported to meetings of the UFWA. These reports further emphasized the need for more aggressive health reforms and controls.

Presenting the report on public health, Sears stated in 1923 that “health should be given attention before everything else; since scientists claimed that the progress of a people was largely dependent upon the health of that people.”<sup>44</sup> The UFA firmly advocated that “the progress of civilization is waiting for the development of a stabilized, efficient political group,” and that social problems could not be dealt with until that goal was met. The UFA certainly considered themselves such an efficient political group, and charged themselves with rejuvenating society. In 1925, the UFWA stated that “in the final analysis the permanence and progress of civilization depend on the mental calibre

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<sup>42</sup> RGF Reid, “Public Health and Municipal Affairs in Alberta,” in *The UFA*, (15 April 1922, Page 3) BPSC item Ar00301.

<sup>43</sup> Amy Samson discusses and defines this construction of public health nursing in Alberta. See unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Saskatchewan (2012?)

<sup>44</sup> Miss JB Kidd, “The United Farm Women of Alberta in Convention,” in *The UFA*, (15 February 1923, Page 6), BPSC item Ar00601.

and physique of its citizenry. What are we going to do to ensure that our civilization shall not pass away with the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome?”<sup>45</sup>

Unlike their passive role in the early part of the organization’s existence, by being elected to the Alberta legislature the UFA, and by proxy the UFWA, were able to fulfill their goals of shaping the community and province to their agrarian values.

Progressing toward their vision of the nation, the women of the UFWA believed it was their duty, as mothers of the race, to support initiatives which promoted the health of the nation. These concerns over health, such as the maternal and infant death rate, warranted progressive reforms and intensive attention of medical and political authorities. Building the structure of the nation from its very foundations, the organization had “the opportunity to make it what we will, for here we have no ancient traditions or barriers to our plans”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 1925 Margaret Gunn suggested that as long as men and women were able to support the foundation of the nation, the structure would rise, but “let the living foundations prove unequal to their task, and the mightiest civilization sags, cracks, and at last crashes down into chaotic ruin.”<sup>47</sup> A large part of their battle for progress became one against degeneration. Unlike earlier stances on the promotion of health for the betterment of the nation, the ideology of farm women by the mid-1920s targeted degeneration.

Education continued to be a focus of UFWA reform throughout the 1920s, as the

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Gunn, “Quality in Citizenship,” 1925 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>46</sup> 1916 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Gunn, , “Quality in Citizenship,” (1925).

organization believed that a “healthy, well-poised mind” was central to the development of good citizenship. Prior to the politicization of the UFA, women had advocated for health reform but primarily focused their efforts on the university extension programmes. Education, according to the UFWA, provided a connection between home, community, and nation that the women, by nature of their gendered expertise, had been advocating for since their inception. With the political clout of the UFA, they were able to make amendments with the Minister of Education in attendance, and several of their early educational reforms were passed. By 1924, the UFWA successfully added compulsory bible reading and prayer, as well as homemaking courses to curriculum.<sup>48</sup> They staunchly believed that these reforms were critical to the future of the nation, and declared that there was a great need to prepare children for manhood and womanhood. According to Margaret Gunn, the race would only be improved if “our young people learn the science of parenthood and the art of homemaking.”<sup>49</sup> Only by becoming more intelligent parents and having more standardly well-kept homes would children learn the “relation of these to the state.”<sup>50</sup> Having reinforced the importance of their own role in political life, through educational reforms the UFWA also emphasized the importance of children.

The UFWA believed that in order to support the progress of the nation, particular attention had to be paid to young people. During the 1920s, the UFWA had developed Junior Branches to further this agenda. In 1926 the work of these branches was

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<sup>48</sup> 1924 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Gunn, “Report on Education” in 1923 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Gunn, “Report on Education” (1923).

applauded, and the convenor of health stated “we have only to realize that a child unable to govern himself can never become an effective citizen in a self-governing community to realize its force.”<sup>51</sup> Progress in education, thus represented not only a reflection of maternal roles in institutions, but further reinforced the progressive mandate of the women. Gunn reiterated this connection and stated that “it may be because we realize the close interdependence of home, school, and community, and that all these factors act and react on the sensitive childish mind, moulding the destiny of the younger generation.”<sup>52</sup> Educated children would necessarily be better citizens if well-informed on political, social and moral issues. This was the impetus behind the UFWA advocacy for a standardized curriculum that promoted regular testing and reporting to parents. Standardized curriculum ensured that the same standards of home and citizenship ideals were promoted to all children, but also required a surveillance of children to ensure that they were meeting those standards. Indeed, Gunn stated that the activities of home, school, and community should be so interrelated that it is `hard to say where the influence of one begins and the other breaks off.”<sup>53</sup>

Women, by their nature as mothers of the race, were necessarily responsible for both progress and the degeneration. Both education and health reform had elevated the role of motherhood in public life as areas in which women were experts. As the UFA became government, those fields remained controlled primarily by women, and the

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<sup>51</sup> “Report of Mrs. J.W. Field on Child Welfare”, 1926 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. RB Gunn, “An Editorial on Education,” in *The UFA*, (15 April 1922, Page 1), BPSC item Ar00101.

<sup>53</sup> Mrs. RB Gunn, “An Editorial on Education,” in *The UFA*, (15 April 1922).

UFWA reforms were fully endorsed and supported by the provincial government. In Alberta the political activism of women was not tied to the vote, and indeed suffrage proved to be just one of many political means for them to achieve their goals of progressing the health, education, and political rights of women. Focusing on controls over health of the individual and the family, their roles as procreators of the nation manifested in the argument that they were also key to the development of the community and the province/nation writ large. However, their political activity in the fields of both health and education would feed into the eugenics project. As the political activity of women elevated their status and demonstrated their vital contributions as mothers of the (healthy) citizenry of Canada and moral guides to Albertan politics, that elevated status consequently became something to be achieved. Any failure to live up to this role, then, made women targets of campaigns against moral, social, and physical degeneration. Indeed, the promotion of women as central to progress also held them responsible for degeneration, both in terms of physical degeneracy and unintelligent parenting. The next chapter will look into this paradox of women as both the authorities on and targets of campaigns against degeneration.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **MOTHERS OF THE RACE: Restricting and Patrolling Motherhood in Alberta**

*Assuredly, in this year of 1932 there is a terrific need for pioneering women, possessed of wide-eyed courage . . . if these are not forth-coming upon call, there is nothing left for us but to invent them. The cause of mankind cannot afford to wait.*<sup>1</sup>

~Emily Murphy

The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), by advisement of the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA), began passing internal resolutions for handling the “question of the increase of mental defectives” in 1919, with formal legislation officially drafted in 1925. The question of how to deal with degeneration dominated UFWA discussions throughout the late 1920s. Frequently, the organization declared that all other health and educational reforms that they had successfully petitioned for were in vain if the “question of defectives,” was not given equal weight in provincial legislation. Jean Field, the UFWA Convenor of Child Health and Welfare asked the 1926 UFWA convention if the menace of “mental defectiveness” was going to be allowed to remain in the province. According to Field, preventative medicine and education were powerless in such situations, and the “constant drain on our physical, mental, and economical resources is incalculable.”<sup>2</sup> In a 1927 speech to the UFWA, Margaret Gunn stressed that any of their goals could be met within a generation if the organization dedicated itself wholly to remodelling civilization.

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<sup>1</sup>Janey Canuck, “Over-Population and Birth Control,” *Vancouver Sun*, (8 October 1932).

<sup>2</sup>Jean Field, “Report of the Convenor on Child and family Welfare,” in 1926 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum , M-1749-44.

Likening the UFWA's work to that of a knight in shining armour, slaying “modern dragons,” Gunn believed that if the organization implemented more extreme measures, the principles of the healthy, educated, and progressive civilization could be met “within the lifetime of those around them.”<sup>3</sup> The UFWA believed that if they were to effectively and efficiently remodel civilization, extreme political reforms were required. These politics were a natural progression from their emphasis on and authority over all legislation which centred on health, education, and social welfare. Both Margaret Gunn and Emily Murphy asserted to the UFA conventions that “insane persons are not entitled to progeny,”<sup>4</sup> and in March of 1928, the Government of Alberta became the first province in Canada to pass a sexual sterilization programme. The Sexual Sterilization Act created a Eugenics Board with the power to order the sterilization of individuals deemed “unfit to reproduce.”<sup>5</sup>

The UFWA had expressed concern over “the issue” officially in 1923, and the organization struck a committee to develop “methods to handle the increase of mental defectives.”<sup>6</sup> The language of the legislation reproduced the rhetoric of the agrarian farm women, and centred on the idea of intelligent motherhood. The legislation stipulated that an inmate of a mental hospital may be discharged if “the danger of procreation with its attendant risk of multiplication of the evil by transmission of the disability to progeny

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<sup>3</sup>Margaret Gunn, “Our Power to Remodel Civilization,” 1927 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Gunn, “Sterilization” 1927 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>5</sup>*The Sexual Sterilization Act*, Statutes of the Province of Alberta, (21 March 1928, p. 117), in The University of Calgary Archives, The Alberta Law Collection

<sup>6</sup> 1923 UFWAMC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.



were eliminated.”<sup>7</sup> This “risk of multiplication” was directly linked to concepts of intelligence. The restriction on reproduction represented recognition of both the “moral and physical menace” of potentially degenerate parents. As such, the Eugenics Board and the UFWA believed that a “defective” parent represented both a genetic and social threat. Jana Grekul has provided a comprehensive survey of intake forms of the Eugenics Board, and identified “incapable of intelligent parenthood” as a primary reason for sterilization.<sup>8</sup> The category of intelligence became, through the development and implementation of IQ tests by the Eugenics Board defined a category of intelligence which could be “scientifically” evaluated. Individuals who fell below the standard of intelligence required for parenthood would then be candidates for extreme reproductive control.

This act represented the anxiety that developed alongside the agrarian feminist perspective on health reform. Considering that their beliefs on health were directly connected not only to their authority as mothers, but to a broader desire to politically legislate a more intelligent and therefore healthier Canadian citizenry, the women’s organizations in Alberta also targeted women as potential producers of degeneration. Both the UFWA and the Child Welfare organizations in the province advocated for the strict evaluating and patrolling of mothers, children, and households to bring the province to the “new phase of health work.” Sterilization was only one of many methods used by these women to prevent degeneration in future citizens. The UFWA

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<sup>7</sup> *The Sexual Sterilization Act*, Statutes of the Province of Alberta, (21 March 1928, p. 117).

<sup>8</sup> Jana Grekul, “A Well-Oiled Machine: Alberta’s Eugenics Program, 1928-1972,” in *Alberta History* (Vol. 59, no. 3, Summer 2011), 16.

promoted stricter control over marriage, and a need for more social workers and public health nurses in the community in order to locate and control potentially degenerate populations. This chapter analyses the concurrent construction of motherhood as a category of national progress which required observation and control alongside the rise of the authority of motherhood as a whole.

Feminists in Alberta were elated by the success of the Sexual Sterilization Act in 1928. Later to be defined as the greatest success of the United Farm Women of Alberta, the bill represented the efforts and potential of organized agrarian feminists in the province. A year later, these women celebrated another achievement in the success of the Persons Case and the legal recognition of women in Canada as qualified persons. Both of these milestones – the Sexual Sterilization Act for the eugenics movement and the Persons Case for the women’s movement – are often used as examples of the movements’ final pinnacle. Historians have argued that the by the 1930s, both feminist and eugenic thought began to decline.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Wendy Kline has contested this stance and argued that, in the United States, this period represents merely a shifting in eugenic strategies.

Kline has argued that the causal link between parents and children shifted in the 1920s and 1930s from heredity to environment, which emphasized family relationships over genetic makeup.<sup>10</sup> Defined as ‘positive eugenics’, the new emphasis on the family unit and home encouraged the procreation of the ‘fit’. However, within the politics of

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<sup>10</sup> Wendy Kline, *Building A Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eu-genics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 98-99.

agrarian feminism in Alberta, the connections between individual health, home environment, and national betterment were never distinct from each other. As such, the UFA never distinguished positive from negative eugenics, and instead perceived all policies which promoted national progress and prevented degeneration as part of the same broader political interests. The UFWA ideology dictated that a healthy, intelligent, educated mother was a national asset as she promoted the interests of the nation by her very existence, and deserved the full support of the state. Subsequently, an unhealthy or unintelligent mother was a threat to the progress of the nation and required the strictest of state controls.

Influenced by the idea of strong children as symbols of a strong nation, women in Alberta organized around issues of maternal and child health. Membership in the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare increased dramatically during the 1920s, due in part to its leader, Maude Riley. Her early speeches challenged those critics of feminism who sought to blame “degeneracy” on female activism. Riley believed that the geographic and social isolation of women was to blame for high infant mortality rates. Organization and cooperation of women continued to assist with national growth. In her most famous speech, *The Right of the Child to be Well-Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed*, she responded directly to American eugenicist George E. Dawson’s text *The Right of the Child to be Well Born*, in which he blamed feminism for the rise of degeneracy. He believed that it was the academic, professional, and public woman who had abandoned the concept of motherhood to the sundering of the nation. He defined this type of active woman as detached, “heroines of novels, the central figures of the stage,

the subjects of all types of popular art” but ultimately failed mothers.<sup>11</sup>

Dawson encouraged the women involved in public life in America to abandon their activism and return to private life in order to secure motherhood values. Historians have argued that it is these ideals which shaped education for motherhood and represented an attempt to return politicized women to their maternal roles in order to promote the merits of motherhood. Veronica Strong-Boag has argued that the production of child care literature and welfare clinics represented an interest in promoting motherhood to combat the “worldly ambitions of the new woman.”<sup>12</sup> This criticism of the “New Woman” in which women were expected to relinquish power to male authorities over motherhood is an element of the broader historical argument that feminism declined in this period. The crux of this argument is that if intelligent motherhood required women to abandon their ideals as feminists, and intelligent parenthood gained popularity during this period, then certainly feminism declined. Katherine Arnup stated that due to the lack of self-determination in their role as “mothers of the nation,” women were blamed for any failures in child-rearing, and their self-autonomy necessarily declined.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Caleb Saleeby, a qualified obstetrician and active member of the British Eugenics Education Society, opposed his contemporaries – such as the “Father of Eugenics,” Sir Francis Galton – who took strong anti-feminist stances in their eugenic

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<sup>11</sup> George Ellsworth Dawson, *The Right of the Child to be Well-Born*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1912), 28-30.

<sup>12</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919 – 1939*, (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1988), 149-150.

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Arnup, “Education for Motherhood: Creating Modern Mothers and Model Citizens,” in *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings*, ed. Robert Adamoski, Dorothy E. Chunn, and Robert Menzies, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, Ltd., 2002), 266-267.

philosophies. Perceiving the feminist movement as potentially “ruinous to the race” if it continued to ignore the eugenics movement, he coined the term “eugenic feminism” in his 1911 text *Woman and Womanhood: A Search for Principles* to describe his attempts to mitigate the two seemingly oppositional ideologies.<sup>14</sup> Saleeby stressed the importance of motherhood, and claimed

there is immediate need for the presentation of a case which is, from first to last, and at whatever cost, eugenic; but which also--or, rather, therefore--makes the highest claims on behalf of woman and womanhood, so that indeed, in striving to demonstrate the vast importance of the woman question for the composition of the coming race, I may claim to be much more feminist than the feminists.<sup>15</sup>

He strongly opposed those eugenicists who exclusively focused on the male line of heredity and “ignored those civilising qualities of maternal love, sympathy, intuition . . . at the very heart of woman's race responsibilities;” and, while he supported equal legal and educational rights for women, he also criticized those women who selfishly deserted the ranks of motherhood.<sup>16</sup> For Dr. Saleeby, the obvious solution to potential social problems of both first-wave feminism and eugenics could be found in a renewed emphasis on motherhood.

The role of women within Albertan politics, however, garnered them a privileged position in determining the course of social reforms relating to women. Indeed, Maude Riley took great issue with this criticism of public women, herself involved in dozens of

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<sup>14</sup> Caleb Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood: A Search for Principles*, (London: Mitchell-Kinnerly, 1911), 1-34.

<sup>15</sup> Saleeby, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Grant Rodwell, “Dr Caleb Williams Saleeby: the Complete Eugenicist,” in *History of Education*, (Vol. 26, No. 1, 1997), 37.

organizations and a mother of three. In Alberta women were already widely recognized for their contributions to the political success of the province within the United Farmers of Alberta and within the agrarian feminist framework. They did not rely upon the legitimacy of medical health professionals in order to further maternal health reform. Rather, as the “experts” on motherhood in the province, the already politicized and organized women of Alberta developed a series of publications which recognized the voices of female leaders and public health nurses, and fulfilled a twofold duty of educating isolated rural mothers and petitioning the government for further funding and political reform.

The “right of the child to be well-born,” became the most reprinted of her speeches within women’s organizations across the province. This right later became a focus of the UFWA’s interpretation of child welfare. However, within her proclamation she made five demands that focused the remainder of her career. The Calgary Child Welfare organization had claimed in 1921 that “as a province, our children are our greatest natural resource, and the care of them must always be our greatest duty.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, a declaration by Riley in 1924 became unanimously adopted as the mandate for all of the organizations represented by the broader provincial council on child welfare. Responding to the emphasis of medical authority and the blaming of politically active mothers for degeneracy that was present in national as well as early provincial child welfare literature, Riley wrote “have you ever realized how unjust and unfair we

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<sup>17</sup> Provincial Health Department, “Concerning the Public Health Nursing Service,” in Calgary Child-Welfare Association, “Child-Welfare and Milk Campaign Week May 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> 1921 Program,” Child Welfare Week Programs, 1921-1923, 1925, in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M8401-36.

have been to the mother and the child.”<sup>18</sup> Riley openly condemned those critics of feminism who sought to return women to the private sphere. For Riley, the direction of child welfare was clear as she declared “let us cease to penalize motherhood.”<sup>19</sup> She believed instead that the nation needed wise mothers at the forefront of policy making to ensure the health of future children. The goals of the community, she argued, should be aligned with those of the “best and wisest” parents.<sup>20</sup> Riley advocated for the promotion of an intelligent motherhood through the production of handbooks, of which annually the organization printed and distributed approximately ten thousand.

Alongside a request for certificates of health before marriage, Riley also demanded public support for trained public health nurses, maternity hospitals, medical inspection of children by free clinics, and child and motherhood allowances.<sup>21</sup> Rather than exclusively focusing her efforts on the intelligence of children, her broad mandate focused on all aspects of the health of the individual child and mother. She declared that thousands of babies had been allowed to “needlessly die or grow handicapped” due to government inaction, which drew attention to the high infant mortality rate.<sup>22</sup> She called upon women to maintain the high standards of government that had led to suffrage, and stated that “when a mother takes her life into her hands in order to give the world God’s

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<sup>18</sup> Maude Riley, “The Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed,” in Child Welfare and Milk Campaign Week Handbook, (March 1918), in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8401 - 36.

<sup>19</sup> Maude Riley, “The Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed,” (1918).

<sup>20</sup> “Mrs. Riley’s Address to the 1924 Regular Meeting”, Alberta Child and Family Welfare Organization Fonds, MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, item M6466 (4).

<sup>21</sup> “Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed” Speech to the Calgary Children’s Aid Society, MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8401-28.

<sup>22</sup> “Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed” Speech to the Calgary Children’s Aid Society, MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8401-28.

most precious gift – a baby – surely we, as a Nation, ought to do our share to give that babe the best possible development, physically, mentally, and morally.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Riley held mothers accountable for the health of their individual children, but also held the government responsible for the welfare of that mother and child. Not exclusively blaming mothers for high infant mortality rates, Riley pointed to the uniquely rural issues that plagued mothers of Alberta, including a lack of access to education and health care. Governments, Riley believed, were to blame for not providing opportunities for women to become intelligent parents. It thus became the role of women to ensure that such prospects were available. Despite the fact that the health of homes overall was the responsibility of the government, and required legislative reform, any deficiencies in distinct children or homes remained the responsibility of the individual mother. To be “well born” required the efforts of the mother, the network of women contributing to educational and health reforms, and the legislative contribution of the state.

By the mid-1920s the “right of the child to be well-born” speech was regularly reprinted and endorsed by women’s organizations across the province. The Calgary Child Welfare Organization similarly drew eugenic conclusions from the high infant mortality rate following the First World War. In a 1921 handbook the organization stated that in 1917 the rate of infant mortality in Alberta was 105 to the thousand and those losses were mainly due to ignorance on the part of parents.<sup>24</sup> The child-centred approach to family welfare created a forum for advocacy for playground reform, better baby

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<sup>23</sup> “Right of the Child to be Well Born, Well Treated, Well Housed, and Well Fed” Speech to the Calgary Children’s Aid Society, MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8401-28.

<sup>24</sup> “Concerning the Public Health Nursing Service,” in Child Welfare and Milk Campaign Week Handbook, (March 1918), in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, item M840 –36.



clinics, maternal health reform, mothers' allowances, mental health, and nutritional reform.

By 1923 Riley had abandoned many of the women's organizations to which she had become involved with. She believed that the existing maternal and child health organizations were neither family nor child centric enough, and formed her own group.<sup>25</sup> Later that year, Riley incorporated several groups under a new umbrella, the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare, which had the exclusive mandate of representing a common concern for the health and well-being of mothers and children.<sup>26</sup> Riley saw her organization as central to defining the standards of good parenthood for mothers, but also to make the government of Alberta more "Child Welfare conscious." Unlike the UFWA, the child welfare organization tended to describe motherhood in moral terms. Historical sociologist Mariana Valverde notes that the heavy emphasis of mothering the race through women's roles as moral teachers of children represented an evangelical stance, which was less rigid than genetic determinism and had the potential to view all people as potentially useful members of society.<sup>27</sup> Moral motherhood could be taught, and if

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy Millar, "Maude Riley: Never a Trailer," in *Alberta History* (Vol. 54, No. 3: Summer 2006) pp. 11-16.

<sup>26</sup> It served as an umbrella for welfare in the province, and included the Local Council of Women, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), Mount Royal Mother's Club, Sunalta Mother's Club, American Woman's Club and Canadian Women's Press Club. Later affiliates included Home and School Associations, Baptist Women of Alberta, Farm Women's Union of Alberta (FWUA), Canadian Girls In Training (CGIT), Elizabeth Fry Society, Indian Association of Alberta, University Women's Clubs, Ladies Orange Benevolent Association, Women of Uniform, and Calgary Business and Professional Women's Club. See Archives of the Glenbow Museum, "Brief History of the Organization".

<sup>27</sup> Mariana 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 Mariana Valverde, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 18-19.

mothers were able to follow rules and guidelines outlined by experts in the field, degeneration could be effectively halted. Perceiving the methods of educating mothers as central to the prevention of degeneracy, the members of the child welfare movement charged themselves with disseminating this expert knowledge to mothers, and petitioning the government for support.

Historian Dianne Dodd, in an article outlining the role of national motherhood advice literature during this period, argued that although this form of public health literature may be useless for providing the perspective of the individual user, they provide insight into the politicization of the infant and maternal health reform.<sup>28</sup> Produced initially by the Calgary Child Welfare Organization as early as 1918, then later encompassed within the broader Alberta Child and Family Welfare Organization, mothering handbooks were available to participants in the annual child welfare week campaigns and sent to rural districts to widen the network of the organization. While some apprehension existed as to the impact of the women's vote, the government felt compelled to recognize the pioneering role played by women's groups by politicising the poor state of infant and child maternal health.<sup>29</sup> Reform over maternal health was a central goal of the Alberta Child and Family Welfare Organization. Because the provincial government was slow in recognising this need, members of the organization took it upon themselves to promote these educational reforms.

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<sup>28</sup> Dianne Dodd, "Advice to Parents: The BlueBooks, Helen MacMurchy, MD, and the Federal Department of Health, 1920-1934", in *The Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, (Volume 8: 1991, 204).

<sup>29</sup> Dianne Dodd, "Advice to Parents: The BlueBooks, Helen MacMurchy, MD, and the Federal Department of Health, 1920-1934", in *The Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, (Volume 8: 1991, 208).

Throughout the 1920s meetings and declarations presented by the Calgary Child and Family Welfare Organization included support for more aggressive social reforms. Child welfare handbooks in the early 1920s reiterated this stance, often focusing on child welfare as a matter of detecting and eliminating “degeneracy.” In a 1923 address to the Calgary Child Welfare Week, which was reprinted in several handbooks, the president of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare stated that, “we are, however, fighting the results of generations of ignorant, apathetic, and careless living in regard to child health.”<sup>30</sup> Though health clinics were a primary goal of the organization, the prevention of defective immigrants, and ending the procreation of the “feeble minded,” were considered equal priorities to promote the overall progress of the nation.<sup>31</sup>

By 1928, the same year that the UFWA successfully passed the Sexual Sterilization Act, a speaker at the regular meeting of the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare stated that “broken homes . . . are known to be the cause of most of the present day delinquency amongst children, which is so often accompanied by the social diseases, illegitimacy, and prostitution.”<sup>32</sup> In the 1928 health topics pamphlet produced by the Calgary Child Welfare Week, the “broken home” was defined as one in which parents were not performing their proper functions due to illness, mental defect, or “other

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<sup>30</sup> AP Paget, “The Goals of Child Welfare,” in All Calgary’s Child Welfare Week Program and Health Topics by Eminent Authorities, (20 October 1923) in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum item M-8401-35.

<sup>31</sup> AP Paget, President “The Goals of Child Welfare,” (20 October 1923).

<sup>32</sup> Calgary Child Welfare Week Program and Health Topics Pamphlet, (April 1928), in MHRF, Child Welfare Week Programs 1926-1928, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M8401-37.

causes.”<sup>33</sup> The need was not only for intelligent parents, but also for educated public health experts to assist and educate parents, and furthermore to rely upon more trained (female) expert teachers, nurses, and social workers to both educate and survey the population. Women were thus elevated in these positions as both the producers and surveyors of standards of health and welfare.

The child welfare handbooks produced during this period emphasized the authority of these experts. The nearly ten-thousand handbooks distributed each year included nutrition information and standards of normalcy. Height and weight charts, for example, were provided for mothers to measure their children against the “normal” child.<sup>34</sup> By creating an accessible standard of “normal,” the organization identified how many children were falling below normal and made recommendations for how to deal with those issues. This process of standardizing childhood provided information for parents to improve themselves and monitor their children against the norm. Both intended to be educational and empowering, these handbooks provided an opportunity for mothers to become more intelligent in the science of motherhood, but also standardized the expectations of the healthy child.

In addition to standards for mothers to measure within the private home, these criteria were promoted by public health nurses and teachers as a method of surveying the general population. Though public health nursing was a response of the Liberal government to UFWA petitions for greater rural access to health care in 1919, the

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<sup>33</sup> See Wendy Kline, *Building A Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>34</sup> Height and weight charts begin in 1918 and continue to 1935.

growing political demands of Irene Parlby and the women of the UFWA in the early 1920s prompted the government to support an innovative travelling health clinic programme in 1924. Between 1925 and 1931 the Provincial Department of Health fully endorsed and funded summer travelling clinics, and a public health nurse conducted preliminary surveys of rural populations and made recommendations to the travelling clinics for further diagnosis.<sup>35</sup>

The Child Welfare Organization supported and petitioned the government for these medical inspections of schools led by nurses in order to identify the “subnormal” child. Proper supervision and guidance were key factors in promoting the future health and welfare of the nation. Indeed, Riley called upon the role of modernity, expert knowledge, and specialization as key to their functioning. In a 1929 meeting of the Child Welfare Organization, they declared that just as highly trained men were in demand to control politics and finances, child welfare required equally specialized female staff. The organization demanded that the province fund even more expertly trained women to take charge of child welfare work.”<sup>36</sup> The Child Welfare Organization was successful in recommendation for public health experts in every district of the province. The UFWA and Child Welfare Organization endorsed the 1929 amendment to *The Public Health Act* which promoted the appointment of a public health nurse to each district to be

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<sup>35</sup> See Reports of Public Health Nursing, reports and addresses to the annual conventions of the UFA and UFWA (1921-19??). Also see Sharon Richardson “Alberta’s Provincial Travelling Clinic, 1924-1942” in *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* (Vol 19, 2002, pp245-263) for the political history of the travelling clinics.

<sup>36</sup> The monthly meeting of the Council of Child 1929, in Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare Minute Book (page 136), MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-6466-5.

responsible for health education work, health examinations, and pre-natal, child welfare, and follow up work.<sup>37</sup> These public health nurses regularly published their findings from school and district health examinations in the Child Welfare Handbooks.

For example, in 1924 a report of medical inspections in schools indicated that over about 20 per cent of school children were underweight by ten per cent.<sup>38</sup> Responding to this issue of child health, the following 1925 handbook emphasized the standard height and weight charts, but also included increased diet requirements for children. The handbook included healthy recipes which were simple, inexpensive, and healthy, and guidance for the dietary requirements for young children. The authors of the handbook encouraged mothers to attend the school clinics with their children to receive more information and emphasized that no one could take the place of mothers in ensuring the health of their own child. This further reinforced the idea that women not work outside the home, as they were expected to be the arbiters of their own child's development, but also accompany their children to these clinics.

The handbook stated that "it is the sacred right of your child to be as healthy as knowledge can make it. Proper feeding, fresh air, and early to bed are three of the chief factors in health".<sup>39</sup> At the bottom of several pages the handbook stressed the need to attend school examinations with their child and threatened that "if you do not patronize

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<sup>37</sup> "An Act to amend the Public Health Act," Statutes of Alberta 1929, Chapter 36, 333.

<sup>38</sup> "All Calgary's Child Welfare Week Health Program, Health Topics, and Recipes, April 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> 1925", in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, M-8401-36.

<sup>39</sup> "All Calgary's Child Welfare Week Health Program, Health Topics, and Recipes", (April 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> 1925), in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-8401-36.

your own service, do not grumble at its deficit at the end of the year.”<sup>40</sup> These handbooks provided an opportunity for public health nurses to distribute their findings to mothers across the province, as well as provide standards for homes to be available when the nurses were not. They thus provided a twofold service of reinforcing the need and support for the expertise of the public health nurse, and place some impetus on parents to learn a new intelligent parenthood. The expertise of these nurses and handbooks emphasized the need for the surveillance and control of motherhood. The public health nurse was not meant to take the place of the mother within the home, but was constructed as integral to providing external expert support for women.

The child welfare handbooks also outlined a recommended daily feeding and activity schedule for children. The UFWA drew agrarian comparisons between care of livestock and care of children. Just as the agricultural schools had experimented and found the ideal balanced rations to feed cattle, so did scientific feeding need to be applied to children.<sup>41</sup> These Department of Public Health sponsored “Daily Health Guides for Boys and Girls,” included primarily a balance for children between appropriate play, nutrition, and rest. They also provided rigid regulation of what acceptable mothers activities could be. Scheduled to the hour, the pamphlets allowed for some leisure time for mothers, typically to be filled with political activity or study.<sup>42</sup> The flip side of this service provided by public health nurses was the restriction and surveillance of mothers

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<sup>40</sup> “All Calgary’s Child Welfare Week Health Program, Health Topics, and Recipes,” (April 1925).

<sup>41</sup> Marion Sears, 1921 MRAC, UFAF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, Micro-UFA.

<sup>42</sup> “All Calgary’s Child Welfare Week Health Program, Health Topics, and Recipes”, (1925-1936), in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum file m-8401-36.

and children.

The issue of ill and undernourished children drew the attention of the United Farm Women of Alberta in the late 1929 as well. Mrs. F.E. Whyman, the First Vice-President of the UFWA during a public address at Child Welfare Week, and declared found it surprising that the large percentage of children not being properly nourished and cared for. Again appealing to agrarian sensibilities, she stated that “it should be just as interesting for parents, and a great deal more important, to see that their children are the proper weight in accordance with their age and height, as it is for our farmers to bring their pigs to standard weight for the market.”<sup>43</sup> Not placing the blame for the weight issue exclusively on mothers, Whyman believed that it was the duty of rural organizations to bring into their communities child welfare agencies, and urged all communities to secure the services of a baby clinic, examination of school aged children by school nurses, clean drinking water, and community playgrounds. She stated that “communities can help child welfare in administering in many ways [*sic*] to the mental and spiritual growth and development of their children.”<sup>44</sup>

Experts in the field of mental hygiene were also sharing in the construction of social welfare as beneficial to the reduction of mental illness. Dr. Fitzpatrick, the psychiatrist in charge of the Mental Hygiene clinics in the province emphasized in 1930 that “it is agreed that were it possible, to place everyone in a sure and successful economic position, that our social problems would be diminished immediately” and that

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<sup>43</sup> Mrs. F.E. Whyman, “Child Welfare Week and Rural Alberta,” in *The UFA*, (1 May 1929), BPSC item AR02005.

<sup>44</sup> Mrs. F.E. Whyman, “Child Welfare Week and Rural Alberta” (1929).



“the ultimate social welfare will not be apparent within a short period and we must try, if possible, to think ten or twenty years ahead on this matter.”<sup>45</sup> He was no longer concerned with the immediate problem of the “feeble minded” that had been the primary concern five years earlier. The child welfare organization quickly embraced this support and further advocated that “the money now spent in treating these by-products of neglected mental deficiency be diverted into early education, training and treatment. . . in the long run, prevention is always cheaper than cure, besides saving untold wretchedness, heartaches, and misery.”<sup>46</sup> In addition to an emphasis on the need for experts in health care to be present in the community, during the 1930s the organization also promoted the need for specialized education and teachers to provide this training and treatment of children.

It was confirmed that original estimates of the percentage of mental illness due to inheritance were too high at a regular meeting of the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare in 1929. Instead of the previously estimated eighty-five per cent inheritance rate, the new approximation was closer to fifty per cent.<sup>47</sup> The council’s conclusion from this new statistic was that “mental defect” should be primarily managed by a cooperative health program, and that the value of sterilization needed to be more

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<sup>45</sup> Dr. Charles F. Fitzpatrick, “Mental Hygiene and Conduct Clinics,” In the Child Welfare Week program, (20 April 1930) as found in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M840-37.

<sup>46</sup> “The Training of the Mental Defective,” in the Child Welfare Week program, (20 April 1930) in MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file m-8401-37.

<sup>47</sup> “Regular Meeting of Child Welfare” (22 November 1929) in Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare Fonds, MHRF, Archives of the Glenbow Museum file M6466.

seriously questioned.<sup>48</sup> If the home environment was responsible for half of the cases of “defectiveness” in the province, then more stringent controls over motherhood needed to be implemented. This declaration also allowed the Child and Welfare Organization to openly criticize government spending on sterilization and institutionalization rather than child and maternal welfare, and further justified the existence of public health nurses, social workers, and teachers. Riley stated that “society has hitherto spent money for Reform Schools rather than Training Schools, for Jail Colonies rather than Farm Colonies. This process must be reversed, and can be with a very real degree of confidence on the part of the Government.”<sup>49</sup> Alongside the development of specialized motherhood to prevent the degeneration of children, stories began circulating in the Child and Welfare organization that specialized training may also assist those children already deemed defective.

At their 1929 regular meeting, the Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare declared that although mental hygienists admitted the influence of heredity, “something may be done to encourage or prevent development along certain lines,” and that their clinics could assist “the child or adult who may have some behaviourism or conduct – encouraged by the environment of home life or any other source – to react so that they may become normal in their behaviour.”<sup>50</sup> With proper training in specialized schools, the Child Welfare Organization advocated, the “deficient” child could be improved. Dr. DL McCullough explained in a 1936 handbook that

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<sup>48</sup> “Regular Meeting of Child Welfare” (22 November 1929).

<sup>49</sup> “Regular Meeting of Child Welfare” (22 November 1929).

<sup>50</sup> “Regular Meeting of Child Welfare” (22 November 1929).

the mentally deficient child of moron grade can at least be made into a law abiding, useful citizen if his school course is adapted to his abilities, if he is allowed to progress at the pace nature has dictated as normal for him, if he is sympathetically handled and not driven into an inferiority complex with all its aftermath of mental deterioration or lethargy.<sup>51</sup>

This construction of the ability to reform the mentally “defective” child was met with some inspiration by the Child and Family Welfare Council. Promoting the idea that proper training was fundamental to the health of the children, and thus the future of the nation, this ideal fit with Riley’s emphasis on the right of every child to be well-taught as a part of the promotion of child health.

Within the *Canadian Home Journal* article, Judge Emily F. Murphy stated that “it is my opinion, and I hope you will agree with me, that there is no reason for burning incense to a woman simply because she has fulfilled the natural functions of her sex.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in a 1932 article for the *Vancouver Sun*, Murphy declared that “perhaps, after all, there is not so much credit in being a mother as being fitted to be one.”<sup>53</sup> This new intelligent motherhood for agrarian feminists included cooperation between mothers in network of expert knowledge. To be an intelligent mother included actively participating in the new culture of motherhood literature and conferences. However, the layer of experts on maternity created a surveillance culture in the 1930s which also closely

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<sup>51</sup> Dr. D.L. McCullough, “The Training of the Mental Defective,” in *Alberta’s Child Welfare Week Program and Health Topics*, Alberta Council on Child and Family Welfare, 1936, MHRF, , Archives of the Glenbow Museum, file M-8401-39.

<sup>52</sup> Judge Emily Murphy, “Love the Fulfilling of the Law,” in “Back on life,” *Canadian Home Journal*, (May 1931, p. 30) as found in Emily Murphy Fonds, City of Edmonton Archives scrapbook one, file MS-2-3-72.

<sup>53</sup> Janey Canuck, “Sterilization of the Insane,” in *Vancouver Sun*, (24 September 1932) as found in Emily Murphy Fonds, City of Edmonton Archives scrapbook one, file MS-2-3-72.

monitored and strictly controlled it. Mothers were required to follow specific child welfare controls, closely monitor the physical and intellectual growth of their children, and regularly attend health clinics to ensure that their children were meeting standards.

The promotion of the procreation of the “fit” was often upheld to be used alongside negative eugenic efforts, which sought to restrict the reproductive abilities of those deemed “unfit.” Within the female-authored expert sources of the UFWA, a narrative style is frequently used to describe stories of both “bad” and “good” motherhood. All of these mothers are constructed in opposition to the ideal national mother in the rhetoric of the UFWA and Child Welfare organizations, served to further reinforce the political power of women. While women were being constructed within Alberta as ideal national mothers worthy of political status to balance that of men on a social level, the science of motherhood was simultaneously becoming politically relevant. This new method of scientific thinking changed how people thought about mothering. Good mothers monitored not only their children, but also their own behavior.<sup>54</sup> As well, external female experts further monitored and controlled motherhood. Though the Sexual Sterilization Act is usually utilized as the epitome of eugenic reforms in the province, all of these controls over parenthood stem from the same eugenic reasoning.

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<sup>54</sup> The power dynamics involved in “surveillance,” and “monitoring,” have been outlined in detail by Michel Foucault. Of particular note is *The Birth of the Clinic*(1973) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

## CONCLUSION

### **THERE THE PROBLEM STOPPED: The 1930s and the Legacy of Aggressive Agrarian Feminism**

*For myself, I returned to my private life, my beloved husband and son, the many home duties, and my garden which had much missed my care.<sup>1</sup>*

~Irene Parlby

In 1931, the *Canadian Home Journal* published the thoughts of “representative Canadian women” requesting that they look back on their lives. The group of women included several notable Albertans including Irene Parlby, Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, and Nellie McClung. All of the women featured in the article, save for Irene Parlby, emphasized the role of motherhood in not only their own lives but as an integral feature of women’s lives in general. Mrs. John Scott of Montreal stated that “looking back on life, I rejoice to see the increasing importance of Motherhood and the growing consideration accorded to maternity.”<sup>2</sup> Contrary to earlier fears of the potentially harmful effects of feminism and suffrage, these women continued their longstanding beliefs in and advocacy for the primacy of motherhood. Following the monumental legislative successes that the organized women of Alberta were able to achieve in a short period of time, including women’s suffrage, dower rights, mother’s allowances, and the Sexual Sterilization Act, these women continued their advocacy for issues surrounding the

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Parlby, “Irene Parlby’s Rambly Memories,” [1963] in Red Deer and District Archives, Parlby Family Fonds, standard number: mg-7-1-2-12

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. John Scott, “Now that I am Seventy-Six,” in “Back on Life,” *Canadian Home Journal*, (May 1931, p. 6, 30) as found in Emily Murphy Fonds, City of Edmonton Archives scrapbook two, file MS-2-3-72.

privilege of motherhood.

Emily Murphy continued to support all forms of eugenic policies long after the formal legislation was passed. She stated directly that “there are some families which should become extinct – that parenthood is not for all, but is a privilege which should be denied to those who are biologically unfit for it”<sup>3</sup> and criticized the opponents to sterilization who utilized arguments of private liberty. Though historians have argued that eugenicists can be predominantly found in the ranks of medical professionals, the aggressive politics of women in Alberta were far from mere sentiment. Though the women involved in organized politics in Alberta were interested in promoting family health, the new science of eugenic thought also necessitated some restriction of motherhood.

The 1930s represented some dramatic challenges for organized farm men and women of Alberta. The depression era brought great economic and social upheaval for the people of Alberta. As Cynthia Comacchio argued, the relationship between poverty and health was irrefutable after the length and severity of the Great Depression.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the child welfare ideal, governments across Canada began to endorse education and public health reforms. Though this supported the ideals promoted by child welfare organizations in Alberta, the government action also took power away from women in determining the course of these new public welfare organizations. In addition to the economic crisis, the 1930s also witnessed a decline in the physical presence of the

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<sup>3</sup>Emily F. Murphy, “The Case for Sterilization,” *The Winnipeg Tribune*, (16 January 1932) as found in Emily Murphy Fonds, City of Edmonton Archives file MS-2.

<sup>4</sup>Comacchio, 158.

powerful female voices which had driven the feminist and agrarian eugenic movement. Within a few months of each other in 1931 Louise McKinney and Henrietta Muir Edwards, two of the Famous Five, died. Emily Murphy remained politically active until her death in 1933. In 1934, Nellie McClung retired from politics and moved to British Columbia, where she focused on writing and broadcasting. In ill health since the late 1920s, Irene Parlby permanently retired from all political activity in 1935 after the dramatic loss for the United Farmers of Alberta in the provincial election.

The rise of the Social Credit party and its electoral victory in 1935 provided a new approach to public welfare, and the voice of women in direct political activity further diminished. Indeed, by 1935, the agrarian feminist movement had rather literally died, and the new Social Credit government followed a slightly different ideological path regarding Child Welfare. As early as 1931, Eleanor Price expressed her concerns over the shifting focus away from eugenics, and asked the annual convention delegates “are we losing courage that we have let this extremely important matter, once discussed, drop?”<sup>5</sup> Yet the UFWA and Child Welfare organizations continued throughout the 1930s to focus their policies on national betterment on the health and welfare of children and mothers and the promotion of “intelligent parenthood”. Despite an overwhelming electoral loss to the provincial Social Credit party in 1935, the United Farm women of Alberta continued to draft resolutions to expand public authority over the promotion of progress and the prevention of degeneracy. In 1937, the Social Credit party passed an

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<sup>5</sup> 1931 United Farm Women of Alberta's board and convention minutes, Glenbow Archives United Farm Women of Alberta Fonds. p. 8. Micro-Ufwa.

amendment to the *Sexual Sterilization Act* which eliminated the consent requirement. In addition, the amended Act expanded the definition of “risk to progeny” to include the potential for mental injury.<sup>6</sup> This act further reinforced the importance of “intelligent parenthood,” further amplifying the legacy of the feminist politics in Alberta.

This thesis challenges the idea of the split between first-wave and second-wave feminism. Imbedded in child welfare, ideas which emerged among first-wave feminists in Alberta fed into later constructions of second-wave feminism following the Second World War. I have analyzed the early development of agrarian feminist politics to exhibit that the interests of feminists in the province reached far beyond the historical construction which posits the end of the movement on suffrage or property rights. The farm women in Alberta did not perceived these rights not as an end in themselves. In fact, they saw these rights as an inevitable and necessary step to the progress of the nation. The politicization of the United Farm Women of Alberta through their cooperation with the United Farmers solidified their governmental ability. Able to directly influence the laws that governed their interests as women by working alongside the UFA, they further developed their ideology and utilized their political power to directly implement radical social changes.

The current historical understanding of eugenics is too narrow. Creating a stronger nation required not only good breeding, but also better public health, and a greater network of social programmes. Pervasive in the discourse of progress in Western Canada, concepts of motherhood and nationalism were combined within a broader

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<sup>6</sup> *An Act to Amend The Sexual Sterilization Act*, Statutes of the Province of Alberta, (14 April 1937), in The University of Calgary Archives, The Alberta Law Collection, p. 181.



discourse of health which was necessarily eugenic. Indeed, the rhetoric of national progress that was promoted by organized farm women in Alberta was directly linked to a desire to create an idealized and progressive future – one which was dependent upon direct intervention and social controls. These early Canadian concepts of national progress, particularly on the prairies, were intrinsically tied to a larger eugenic ideology. Constructions of national progress can be seen in the rise of feminism in Western Canada – a feminism infused with eugenic rhetoric. The United Farm Women of Alberta drafted, promoted, and garnered public support for formal provincial eugenics legislation which produced legislative success by introducing the Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928.

At the same time, on the grounds that maternal virtue improved Canadian society, the 'Famous Five,' in Alberta, including UFWA founder and member of the legislature Irene Parlby, petitioned the federal government to change the language of the British North America Act and gain legal recognition of women as persons. The elevation of women as key to the health of individual citizens, morality of the nation, and pre-eminent authorities on all aspects of motherhood created a layer of female experts who were both politically active and socially elevated. Public health nurses, social workers, teachers, individual mothers, and politically active women were all considered as key players in the future of the nation. These women were not only ideologically powerful, but by the sweeping electoral victory of the UFA in 1921 they had the direct power to draft provincial legislation due to their elevation as equals within Albertan political affairs.

Fundamental to this association of eugenics and feminism in Alberta was the construction of women as equal partners in nation building. The agrarian democratic

ideology was premised on the idea that agriculture was the main industry of Canada. What benefited farmers necessarily benefited the nation. For agrarian socialists, nation-building was directly linked to proper child-rearing and hygienic practices in the home. In a brief self-published history of the United Farmers of Alberta, UFWA member Eva Carter explains that early decisions of the organization were largely concerned with the fact that more attention was being given to the health of livestock and their good breeding than to the health and welfare of Canadian citizens.<sup>7</sup> The agrarian rhetoric surrounding this construction of health directly linked the glory of the nation with strong and healthy citizens. Through the promotion of good health, welfare, and breeding, the agrarian political organizations across the prairies sought to ensure that the “harvest of manhood and womanhood” would include a nobler, stronger, and more intelligent Canadian nation.

Mainly absent from the historical record, this important moment in women's history provides insight into the connections between eugenics, agrarianism, and nationalism. One of the ways in which the women involved in the feminist movement pushed this eugenics discourse forward was through the promotion of public health reform. The only options to help move the nation forward were environment, education, good health, and happiness. For women in Alberta, the idea of national progress included support and outreach for isolated mothers, hygiene education, home economics programmes, and formal eugenics. The general rhetoric of improving health for rural women and children was advocated with an underlying desire to achieve “national betterment”.

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<sup>7</sup> Eva Carter, *Thirty Years of Progress: History of United Farm Women of Alberta* (United Farm Women of Alberta: 1944), 34.

By constructing a history of the rise of agrarian feminist ideals in Alberta, this thesis explains the connections between eugenics and feminism in this particular period of Alberta's history. Valued as equal partners on the farm and therefore deserving of equal status in politics, women constructed their politics around the premise that mothers were critical for the progress of the nation. As such, their fields of political influence in health, social welfare, and education merged with their beliefs in both a physical and ideological connections between maternal and national health, these women felt it was their duty to promote an intelligent motherhood. Socially relevant and politically powerful, these women took their desire to change society for the better to extremes. Quickly swept into power, and with little legislative experience, the women involved in UFA politics sought to change society as quickly as possible. Degeneration, they believe, could be eliminated within one generation with proper reforms and restrictions on motherhood. These political reforms required the full support of women, as they also involved strict surveillance over motherhood. Mary Zeigler argued that eugenic feminism was a contradiction in terms which required the repudiation of feminist ideals.<sup>8</sup> Seemingly contradictory, I contend that eugenics and feminism merge within this rise of agrarian feminism due to the ideological intersection of intelligent motherhood to social growth, the promotion of health as critical to national progress, and the role of women's expertise in health reform.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Ziegler, "Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, the Women's Movement, and the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900-1935," in *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, (Vol 31, 2008), 235.

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