Preface

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Against Their Will

NORTH CAROLINA'S STERILIZATION PROGRAM

By

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GRAY OAK BOOKS
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by Paul Lombardo

In late 2002 the *Winston-Salem Journal* published an extraordinary series of articles on eugenics, and North Carolina’s governor responded by issuing an apology for the abuses of the sterilization program. But even more importantly, the general public was shown for the first time the full scope of how the eugenics program had operated in that state.

It has become commonplace in recent years to describe the history of the eugenics movement in the United States as a story “hiding in plain sight” and that was true in North Carolina.

After all, the 1924 federal law that restricted immigration on eugenic grounds was in force until the mid-1960s, and the so-called “racial integrity” acts prohibiting interracial marriages as threats to the country’s gene-pool were not struck down until 1967. Those laws were no secret, but until recently they took up little space in historical accounts and less in the popular press or in the mind of the average citizen.

The laws that permitted more than thirty states to perform sexual sterilization operations on people deemed “feebleminded” or otherwise “defective” were in effect even longer. Two thirds of them remained in place until the 1970s, and the North Carolina law that gave rise to the accounts contained in this book was not repealed until 2003.

Yet while the more than 60,000 surgeries carried out in the name of eugenics have been forgotten by most Americans, they were never far from the memories of the people who endured them. This book tells the stories of people robbed of the potential for parenthood, their lives permanently diminished by eugenic sterilization. It also chronicles a journalistic campaign spanning more than a decade to reawaken dormant memories and shed new light on a dark episode previously buried in our
national psyche. It gives a voice, often for the first time, to people previously lost to history.

Scholars have explored the history of eugenics for over a generation, but until recently most academic work has failed to appreciably raise public awareness of past abuses perpetrated in America under eugenic laws. Attention began to shift in 2001, when after significant debate, the Virginia General Assembly voted to adopt a resolution of “profound regret” for state laws passed during the 1920s “eugenics era.” Several other states quickly followed with legislation, memorial events and more apologies.

The newspaper series that is reprised in this volume resulted in official recognition by the North Carolina legislature of the state’s involvement in the eugenic sterilization movement and apologies by Wake Forest University and the *Winston-Salem Journal* itself, for the paper’s strong support of eugenics in decades past.

North Carolina became the first—and to date, the only state—to take serious steps toward compensating the living survivors of sterilization laws, and that debate may be reaching a turning point in 2012.

But North Carolina was hardly unique. Those laws were enacted by legislatures in most of the states in this country, and were on the books in some cases for more than seventy years. A common question raised by people hearing this for the first time is: why were those laws ever passed? It requires no special training to understand that people who live on the lowest rungs of the social ladder are often invisible, and laws targeting them gained legislative approval with little opposition. The people marked for sterilization were people living with disabilities, poor people, often people of color, in short, any of the least favored members of our society.

Those were always the most likely victims of eugenics, and as often as not, the argument used to justify the “surgical solution” of sterilization was a simple one. Preventing childbirth among society’s least wanted
citizens, eugenicists said, would prevent more people like them being born to fill up the prisons, and hospitals and welfare rolls.
From the beginning of the eugenics movement in America, fears of a decline in population quality went hand in hand with fears of rising taxes. Much later, and well after World War II, when eugenics had come to be identified with Nazi genocide, many states abandoned their sterilization programs. But North Carolina and a few others accelerated the pace of surgery at the same time precisely to focus on illegitimate births. Women on welfare became the usual suspects for sterilization.

The North Carolina program ended in 1974, and the law was officially rescinded twenty-nine years later. When laws are repealed, they leave few traces in the statute books. Yet the scars they have etched into the bodies of the sterilized do not simply disappear. This book is an attempt to insure that the memories of American eugenics, and the memories of its victims, do not merely fade away; it will make the testimony of people who endured eugenic sterilization part of a permanent record. As we remember those people, we can only hope that the misguided efforts to use eugenic policies to scrub the national genome clean will also remain part of the national consciousness.

The book’s fundamental message is contained in its title: Against Their Will. The operations done on North Carolinians violated a principle established in America before the Constitution was written: no one should be forced to endure surgery without consent. This book reasserts that principle as a reminder for the future.

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Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court & Buck v. Bell
December, 2011