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From Better Babies to the Bunglers: Eugenics on Tobacco Road

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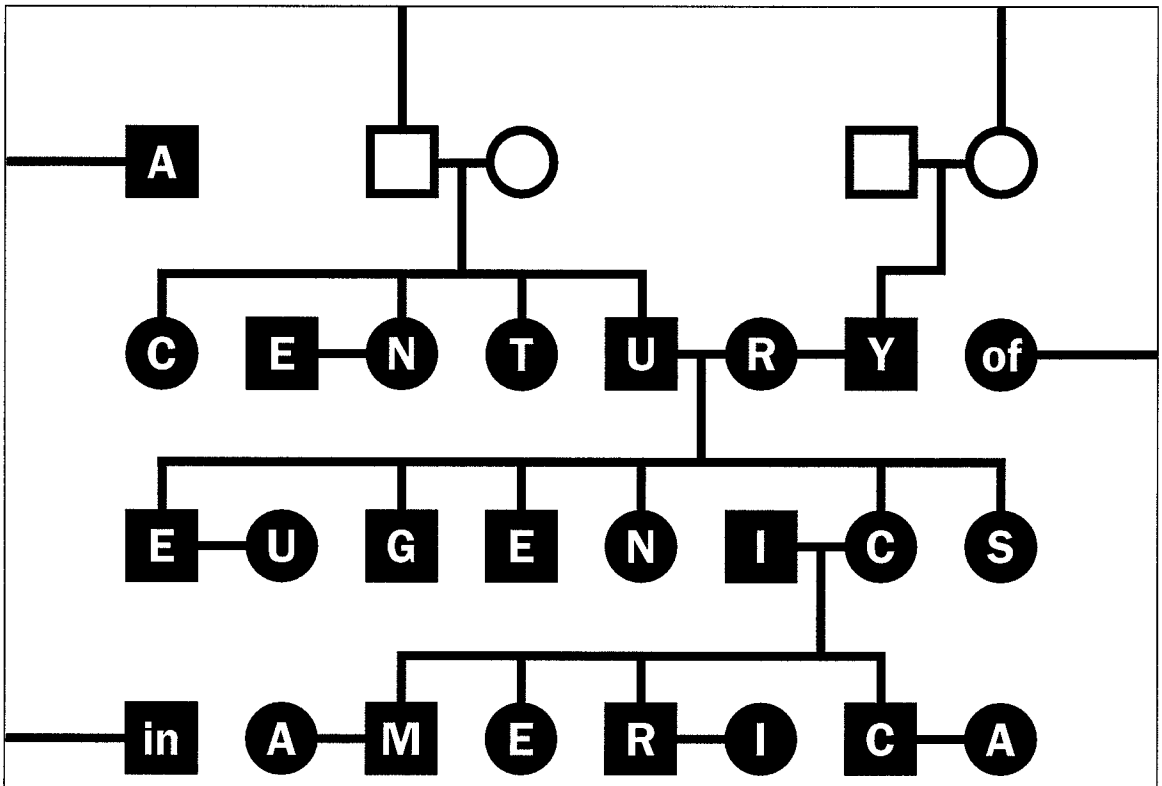

From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era

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EUGENICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

From the first decade of the twentieth century until approximately 1940, *eugenics* was a word that most Americans could expect to encounter regularly. Important citizens made the term respectable, and repetition by schoolteachers, doctors, politicians, and preachers made it an expansive term of reference and eventually a part of popular culture. Mentions of "the well-born science" were common in newspapers and popular magazines, in novels, movies, and plays. Yet there was no universal, uniform definition for *eugenics;* the term encompassed everything from proud pedigrees to healthy births. Over time the invocation of "eugenics" became almost clichéd, as it was employed to signal approval for a wide variety of public policy initiatives. By the time a Chicago politician decided in 1915 to run for alderman as "the eugenic candidate," the term had come to stand for "not just 'good heredity' but goodness itself."[1]

In recent years, historians of American literature and popular culture have identified how pervasive eugenic language and themes became in the first third of the past century.[2] As a result of this scholarship, allusions to eugenics in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald or its satiric invocation by Sinclair Lewis or Ernest Hemingway are no longer unusual.[3] While such references have increased, fiction writers are rarely credited with affecting the passage of law. One underexplored link in the history of eugenics concerns just such a relationship between the Georgia sterilization law, passed in 1937, and Georgia native son Erskine Caldwell. Both the personal and literary dimensions of Caldwell's life were touched by

ideas we now associate with America's eugenics movement. His work was indirectly responsible for a great deal of public debate that ultimately culminated in his home state's sterilization law, the last such law passed in America.[4]

EUGENICS IN GEORGIA

The political history of the sterilization movement in the South was analyzed in detail by Edward Larson in *Sex, Race, and Science,* a work that placed Georgia in the context of several "Deep South" states that took up eugenics.[5] More recently, scholars such as Karen Keely and Betty Nies have described the intersection of popular culture and eugenics, focusing on themes in the work of novelists like Erskine Caldwell.[6] This essay builds upon the insights of those scholars, linking the popular to the political and showing that while Georgia seemed slow to adopt eugenic legislation, it nevertheless was in the forefront among states where "eugenics" was a familiar topic and a mainstay of popular culture. Voices from the press and the pulpit explored the eugenic value of vital statistics and public health, the proper place of eugenics in the schools, the eugenic importance of "fitter families," and the place of eugenic themes in entertainment. Those voices were heard alongside the more commonly remembered, but later articulated, arguments for marriage restriction laws to protect "racial integrity" or laws to impose sterilization on the "unfit" in the name of eugenics. This survey of eugenics in Georgia culminates in an account of Erskine Caldwell's role in the sterilization debates in the 1930s.

From the first years of the twentieth century, news reports focusing on eugenics in Georgia were extensive. Georgians learned that classes on eugenics would be part of the National Corn Exposition in 1913 and that a "department of eugenics" was a critical need within the planned Child Welfare Exhibit in Atlanta that year.[7] When the 1914 Better Babies show proved a "splendid success," leaders of the Women's Christian Temperance Union saw it as the "first step toward eugenics in Atlanta" and predicted that the capital city would be the "pioneer southern city" to embrace the new science.[8] Not everyone welcomed the "wave of agitation over eugenics" that America was experiencing, and some felt that religion was being displaced by a materialistic fetish.[9]

As support for instruction in eugenics gained momentum, the state commissioner of schools was pressed to make a place within the public school curriculum to study the "science of good birth." He declined, saying that some matters were "too delicate to be handled by teachers" and were best left to parents.[10] Others opposed the idea because they judged teaching about the "laws of inheritance" and "scientific marriages" as difficult as the labors of Hercules. Trying to put such knowledge in the hands of children was like asking them to run with scissors or to play "with something that resembles dynamite."[11]

EUGENIC MARRIAGE: MEDICAL CERTIFICATES

But it was hard to escape popular curiosity about eugenics when even baseball-star-turned-preacher Billy Sunday used it to emphasize intergenerational guilt as part of his "sins of the fathers" evangelism.[12] The language of eugenics boosters, mixing nineteenth-century degeneration theory with the newest in Mendelian heredity and Galtonian biometry, provided a convenient shorthand for attacking drunkenness, sexual excess, and socially problematic behaviors of all kinds.

One legislator declared himself a believer in eugenics after seeing *Damaged Goods,* a film billed as a lesson of "sin's consequences" that played in Atlanta to record crowds.[13] Describing the movie as a "wonderful sermon," Colonel Walter Andrews was converted to the need for "strong laws upon the subject of eugenics." He planned to introduce a bill to require a syphilis test and a medical certificate as a requirement of marriage licensing "for the sake of future generations."[14]

When legislation to require a "bill of clean health" of men before marriage was proposed, it generated great controversy. One lawmaker objected that there was "entirely too much reformatory legislation" being introduced. He resisted making couples dependent on the medical profession and "quack doctors" who had no scruples about issuing bogus medical certificates.[15] When an amendment was offered to extend the scope of required testing to women, the bill died after two days of debate.[16] Similar measures designed to protect "the children of tomorrow" were rejected in 1921, 1923, and 1924, often following attempts to expand the required health tests to women.[17] The Georgia Medical Society offered yet another bill in 1928.[18] But like other attempts to enact mar-

riage laws prohibiting unions between potentially "defective" parents, campaigns for marital "social hygiene" in the name of eugenics never succeeded in Georgia.

One commentator said that the fine "scientific" tone of eugenics ignored human experience. She openly satirized eugenic propaganda, particularly the popular notion of "race suicide," which suggested that Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent were having too few children, and that mating with other ethnic groups would muddy the gene pool of "Old Americans." Her "common sense" argument was: "Throw a pile of mud in a stream and about a mile down the stream you don't find anything but pure water. Say do you know the answer to the eugenic stuff? Good food, clean work, fresh air and chuck the booze."[19] But others found a way to more readily adapt the new hereditary science to bolster traditions stretching back to the state's colonial heritage.

THE ONE DROP RULE: THE EUGENICS OF RACIAL INTEGRITY

To most Georgians living at the turn of the twentieth century, white supremacy was a settled reality. There was, however, always the threat that the "supremacy of the Caucasian" could be undermined in the future by "degrading strains of alien blood." Even though southern states maintained antique laws of racial separation, most having been adopted during the colonial era, the need to be vigilant in forestalling the "unspeakable evils that would follow race amalgamation" was an issue revisited regularly. Some even called for national laws to penalize racial interbreeding or "miscegenation."[20] Comparing interracial relations to polygamy, concerned Georgians argued that just as the Mormons had been forced by federal courts to give up plural marriage, Congress could stop race mixers by passing national legislation.[21]

Members of Georgia's medical profession joined their colleagues elsewhere and argued for racial separation by linking public health and eugenics. An infrastructure for more stringent "racial integrity" enforcement was created with the passage of Georgia's public health and vital statistics laws in 1914. Regularly maintained records of birth, death, and marriage provided the framework for tracking data on race and doubled as a way to emphasize the importance of keeping the "germ-plasm" of

different races separate.[22] In 1914, the leaders of Georgia's women's clubs urged their members to support the passage of a public health law that was "social, not self-centered" and benefited from "rational eugenic policies, [and] rational social work directed toward reforms."[23] "Public health" had its own cachet; club leaders made no mention of race.

The value of modern, scientifically derived laws in maintaining the color line became more obvious when states like Virginia amended their older "antimiscegenation" statutes using openly eugenic arguments about the need to keep white bloodlines pure. After national leaders of the eugenics movement, like Harry Laughlin, Lothrop Stoddard, and Madison Grant, helped the founders of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America pass Virginia's Racial Integrity Act in 1924, eugenicists there turned to other states.[24] The Virginia governor wrote to every other governor in the country, enclosing a copy of his state's new law.[25] Responses to the letter were forwarded to Dr. Walter Plecker, coauthor of the law and Virginia's state registrar in the Bureau of Vital Statistics. Plecker managed the complex problem of registering citizens at the time of birth, policing registration at marriage and death, and guarding Virginia's racial purity.

Atlanta lawyer James C. Davis was a member of the Georgia General Assembly who wanted a law in his state that would mirror the Virginia legislation. Davis requested information on the Virginia law and in response received 50 copies of Plecker's booklet, *Eugenics and Racial Integrity in Relation to the New Family.* This booklet included a copy of the law itself and laid out the eugenical arguments that provided its foundation. At Plecker's suggestion, Davis contacted antimiscegenation activist John Powell with an invitation to speak before the Georgia House of Representatives.[26] Powell's role as coauthor of the Virginia law had already drawn attention in the Atlanta press,[27] and in accepting Davis's invitation, Powell attributed his initial idea for the Virginia law to a conversation he had with an earlier Georgia governor. Powell was therefore particularly excited about the prospect of coming to Atlanta to speak to Georgia lawmakers.[28] In preparation for Powell's visit, members of the press urged legislators to come up with a "practicable scheme that will cut down the production of African American mongrels." But the difficulty of devising a law "with teeth" that could be used to enforce racial purity standards was not lost on advocates.[29]

The Davis Racial Integrity Bill was introduced in the 1925 Georgia legislative session. Although it passed the House of Representatives, it reached the Georgia Senate too late for serious consideration and failed to pass. In 1927, the next full legislative year, Davis shepherded the bill successfully through the process and eventually had the pleasure of reporting to Powell and Cox that it enjoyed unanimous support in the Senate, attracted only three negative votes in the House, and had been signed into law by the governor.[30] Eugenics lent a scientific gloss to legislation to uphold "racial integrity" in Georgia, but its ultimate effect was merely to support existing social relations and bolster a culture of white supremacy. Proposals to enact sterilization laws for eugenic purposes were more radical. Their supporters eventually overcame opposition by amplifying fears of spreading degeneracy and inflating concerns about the moral, social, and economic threats of crime and mental defect.

THE POLITICS OF SURGERY: CUTTING COSTS AND CUTTING PATIENTS

The first stirrings of interest about a sterilization law for Georgia appeared in the 1912 comments of a physician at the Milledgeville State Asylum speaking on "Sterilization: The Only Logical Means of Retarding the Progress of Insanity and Degeneracy."[31] Within a year, Georgia physicians took up the cry for state-sponsored sterilization. Their concern was focused on increasing numbers of the "criminally insane, idiots, rapists or moral degenerates" lodged in state institutions, and their bill was advanced by a physician/legislator as "a wise and humane" version of "scientific legislation."[32]

Declaring that "heredity governs the development of the human race," Dr. W. L. Champion urged his legislative colleagues to "safeguard the interests of the unborn" and guarantee "the priceless heritage of physical perfection and masterful mind" to future generations. He argued that "confirmed criminals" and rapists should be castrated.[33] But as with earlier attempts at eugenic lawmaking, some criticized mandatory surgery, calling it "premature faddism" and "hair-trigger" experimentation.[34] The bill failed.

Proclaiming the "medical gospel," one doctor declared eugenic sterilization the centerpiece of the movement for public health laws. Holy

Scripture demanded eugenics laws, he said, "so that the creature of the future may be a better specimen of manhood and womanhood; that there may be fewer inebriates and cripples, that our alms houses, hospitals, penitentiaries, chain gangs and asylums may have fewer inmates, and that our streets may be free of beggars and perverts."[35]

Since the next best thing to sterilization was segregation of the "unfit" to contain their fertility, some pressed for more extensive use of intelligence tests in the public schools to identify "feebleminded children" and place them in state institutions.[36] Soon there was lobbying for an institution to house mentally deficient children. Institution building was expensive, but supporters were quick to point out that the cost of housing was less than the cost of caring for criminals who would be the inevitable children of "defectives" living at large. Provision for the feebleminded was sold as a step in the battle against crime.[37]

In a series of essays printed in the *Atlanta Constitution,* the superintendent of Georgia's Gracewood Training School for Mental Defectives reemphasized the need to identify and segregate feebleminded people living in the community. Repeating conventional wisdom among eugenicists, he argued that feebleminded girls were the source of venereal disease and illegitimacy, that more than 40 percent of prostitutes were feebleminded, and that "30 percent of the children in orphanages were defective."[38] The social costs generated by the feebleminded were the lynchpin of his argument for institutionalization. He said that money was wasted on attempting to rehabilitate defectives in reformatories, or trying to educate the defective in schools, yet too little money had been spent to maintain or expand the state facility that would—by quarantining defectives and preventing their mating—represent a step in preventing those costs.[39] Society should look at the "occasional fool" not as a curiosity that each community should tolerate but as an "active, dynamic enemy to the community life, who goes on propagating his kind with terrible fertility, corrupting the law, morals and health of society, never paying his way, and always living at the expense of others."[40] But the ultimate preventative, embodied in a eugenic sterilization law, remained elusive to Georgia's eugenic reformers. By 1929 more than 20 states had adopted sterilization laws; that same year the Georgia State Asylum was carrying a deficit of almost $2.5 million. As the budget shortfall was announced, a sterilization law was proposed.[41] But again, it failed to pass. Three years

later, the Georgia Medical Society offered another sterilization bill. It included provisions for appointment of a medical board that would choose candidates for sexual surgery.[42] It also failed.

The year 1932 was the deepest point of economic crisis for most of the United States. Although the cloud of worldwide depression settled over Georgia earlier and lasted longer than it would for the rest of the country, serious consideration of sterilization in Georgia did not gain traction until most other states already had sterilization laws. Perhaps at first Georgia lawmakers were unconvinced by the eugenicists' apocalyptic vision; perhaps voters did not favor drastic medical interventions—even upon the most marginal citizens. But when those convictions finally changed, at least part of the reason for the popular acceptance of sterilization in Georgia was due to the controversy engendered by novelist Erskine Caldwell, a Georgia native.

STERILIZATION LAW IN GEORGIA: FROM TOBACCO ROAD TO THE CAPITOL DOME

Caldwell's father, Ira, was a teacher and a Presbyterian minister who also worked as a journalist. Beginning in 1926, he wrote a weekly column for the *Augusta Chronicle* in which he invited his readers to consider the issues of the day. "Let's Think This Over" became a regular feature of the paper, and as Erskine Caldwell's reputation as a writer matured, the senior Caldwell developed a following of his own, writing about topics as varied as lynching, the chain gang, and high interest rates. He invariably took the position of social progressive, a bold posture from his home in rural Georgia.

In 1929, Dr. John Bell spoke to the national meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Atlanta. Bell was well known for his victory in the famous U.S. Supreme Court case of *Buck v. Bell,* which had settled the constitutionality of eugenic sterilization laws. Bell's talk, advocating the sterilization of epileptics, was reported in the press.[43] Only a week later, Ira Caldwell raised "The Eugenics Question" in his column. He doubted the value of eugenic sterilization, noting that some state experiments in surgery were launched with the expectation that "the race could be lifted to higher levels of intelligence" by surgery on "the mentally deficient." Caldwell claimed that new research showed many less promising children had been born of prosperous parents, calling into question the surgical

solution. Caldwell conceded that it was impossible to separate environmental influences from those of heredity. So he pressed to clean up the environment in which poor children were raised, urging at least as much attention to "bad social inheritance" as to "bad blood." Ira Caldwell's positions on eugenics were nuanced. He did not dismiss eugenics entirely, but was skeptical about its immediate utility. "Probably the eugenic laws will in the end render civilization a service," he said, "but at the present time the science is too new, too uncertain to be wholly reliable."[44]

Caldwell then began an experiment, convinced that social amelioration was the key to attacking poverty. He helped a family of desperately poor farmers move from their hovel on the fringes of the county closer to the village he lived in with all of its trappings of civilization—schools, shops, and churches. He arranged a job for the father, school lessons for the children, and had the family enrolled as members of a local church. The whole community pitched in to better the family's lot, yet the experiment proved a failure. The children dropped out of school, the father quit his job, and before long the family had moved back to its ruined shack.[45]

Caldwell despaired and seemed to have given up on the idea that changing the environment could change the motivation and habits of people he characterized as sunk in the "quicksands of ignorance." He worked out his disappointment by writing a series of articles, five in all, published in *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment,* the official journal of the American Eugenics Society. The series carried the fictitious name Caldwell had assigned to the family, "The Bunglers," and it was illustrated with pictures he had taken of the family.[46]

The articles appeared alongside the journal's other discussions of "dysgenics," describing in detail the distressing conditions in which the Bunglers lived. Not altogether pessimistic, Caldwell suggested that the Bunglers, and millions like them, were created by a complex set of factors including "social, economic, and biologic forces" far beyond their control.[47] Caldwell's series was not a eugenic jeremiad about "poor white trash" and the way in which their plight was determined by the inevitable workings of biology. He claimed instead that despite their many shortcomings, the Bunglers were "honest, hard-working people" who did not drink and rarely got into trouble with the law.[48] Nevertheless, Caldwell ended his comments on a much more negative note. Too many Bunglers were afoot, he said, and they were "to all practical purposes, idiots" who

dragged society down. They contributed to the "sociological morass in which the society is more and more engulfed." Perhaps as many as 50 percent of these social "idiots" could be rehabilitated over time. But in the short run, sterilization of them and others of their ilk would lessen the pressure on society to carry the burdens they generated. In a passage consistent with the pronouncements of most supporters of eugenic interventions, Caldwell concluded, "Ignorance, stolid stupidity, thick necks, and low brows are the greatest perils of a republic."[49] Unless these dangers were addressed, the problem would not abate.

Few people would read Ira Caldwell's essay on the grinding poverty of his corner of Georgia; fewer still could understand his struggle with his beliefs. He was pushed alternately toward compassion and a sense of responsibility for his clan of Bunglers, then away from them in disgust and a final admission that only eugenics would offer an appropriate solution to the replication of their kind. In many respects, Caldwell's inner turmoil mirrored that of his region—pulled toward the attractions of modern, industrial life, but repelled by its social leveling and racial intermingling. In contrast, Caldwell's son Erskine would be read by millions; he would reject the eugenics "solutions" he learned both at college in Virginia and as a lament of despair from his father.

Erskine Caldwell was born in Georgia, and he grew up on the state's eastern flank in the village of Wrens, 30 miles from Augusta and the South Carolina border. There he saw rural life as it was lived, riding at times with his father through the countryside, ministering to landowners and sharecroppers alike.

Caldwell's grandmother's lineage qualified him for a scholarship funded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which paid his way to attend the University of Virginia. There he was exposed to some of the giants of the field of eugenics, including Robert Bennett Bean.[50] Caldwell visited the asylums and poorhouses in the countryside around "Mr. Jefferson's University" with Bean and saw firsthand how the new science of eugenics worked. He also learned how the problematic "germ-plasm" of defective citizens contributed to their station in life.[51]

No doubt as a result of his father's influences, Caldwell was a race liberal, something that could not endear him to the Anglo-Saxon Club sympathies of the Virginia campus in the 1920s. As someone whose own limited resources landed him on one of the lower rungs of the social lad-

der at the patrician university, he was forced to work as a janitor in a pool hall to make ends meet. Taking a job that generally fell only to black servants hardly increased his standing in the hierarchical world of Virginia privilege, and Caldwell's first year at the university could not have been pleasant.

Caldwell developed his skill for blunt social critique early in his writing career. In his first published article, written in college at Virginia, Caldwell berated his home state, describing life there in a piece entitled "Georgia Cracker." He railed about Georgia as a place "whose inhabitants do cruel and uncivilized things; whose land is overrun with bogus religionists, boosters, and demagogues; whose politics are in the hands of Klan-spirited Baptists; and yet whose largest city boasts of being 'the greatest city in the greatest state in the world.'"[52] But for the fact that it was printed in a tiny, obscure journal, Caldwell's comments would certainly have drawn the wrath of fellow Georgians.

Caldwell dropped in and out of college at Virginia, finally leaving two years short of graduation. Then he worked in Atlanta as a reporter at the *Atlanta Journal,* learning how to write alongside Margaret Mitchell, later the famed author of *Gone with the Wind.* In 1931 Caldwell left Georgia and moved to New York City, determined to write about the vision that fired his father's reformist passions and ultimately his frustration. Erskine had seen with his own eyes "the poverty and hopelessness and degradation" in the rural South.[53] He left the familiar settings of his youth for the gritty realities of New York, taking some of his own experience and sense of the gritty realities of the rural South with him.

The story of the Bunglers that Ira Caldwell sketched in *Eugenics* became the basis for Erskine Caldwell's novel *Tobacco Road.* Jeeter and Dude Bungler found a new, fictional life as Jeeter and Dude Lester. Other characters from the eugenics journal reappeared in the novel with barely masked physical marks of defect and behaviors that mirrored the real people Ira Caldwell had described. The novelist breathed dramatic life into the people of his home county, picturing them in rundown hovels reeking of squalid poverty and adding touches of sex and scandal guaranteed to shock 1930s sensibilities. Caldwell became famous when *Tobacco Road* was published. He would later be criticized in the South, particularly in his home state of Georgia, for the unflattering, scandalous, pulp fiction vision of the region he created.[54]

THE TOBACCO ROAD TO GEORGIA STERILIZATION

About the time the furor over *Tobacco Road* was settling, an article appeared below a banner headline in the Atlanta Sunday paper. It explained that sterilization would be one of the major legislative objectives of the Medical Association of Georgia for the year, and the program was described by the Association's president, Dr. Charles H. Richardson. Richardson repeated the claim that institutional care for social defectives was too expensive. The proposed law could eventually "save the government a billion dollars a year." Doctors who supported the proposal wanted a commission of their colleagues to decide who would be sterilized. "I would not be in favor of sterilization should it be within the power of politicians to control any part of it," said Dr. W. E. Barber, a former president of the Fulton County Medical Society. Finding a German example he hoped to emulate, another medical society spokesman proclaimed that the "sterilization project of Hitler in Germany is a step in the right direction." While the recent Nazi government enactment "might seem a bit drastic on the surface," he said, "it is being used wisely," and it actually was less expansive than sterilization laws in some American states.[55]

Doctors who initiated the sterilization campaign conceded that the lay public might be able to do a better job of swaying legislators than the professional men had.[56] To that end, Emory University biologist Robert C. Rhodes lectured Rotarians and Masons about eugenics, calling sterilization a "matter of good citizenship."[57] Momentum built for the measure as members of the Georgia Humane Society also pressed for a state sterilization law.[58] These pleas gained added force as the state cut back on funds for institutionalization. E. E. Lindsey, chairman of the State Board of Control for Charitable Institutions, announced that because of reduced state revenue, there would be a 25 percent reduction in the budget appropriation for his agency. That cut came despite the fact that "mental deficiency appear[s] to be on the increase." Lindsey identified sterilization as the best "means of checking the rapid increase in insanity." In Georgia, like other states, sterilization was seen as a budget management, cost-cutting measure.[59] Lindsey argued that sterilizing institutional patients would help "to reduce the burden of taxation."[60] Driving the point home, Lindsey emphasized

that hereditary defects were a "financial problem for the state government and the taxpayers."[61]

While the campaign for sterilization in Georgia grew, Erskine Caldwell was living in New York. Caldwell's novel *Tobacco Road* had been adapted for the stage and had been playing on Broadway for two years when he wrote a newspaper series documenting the poverty he had portrayed in his fiction. The *New York Post* published his four articles, beginning with a scene of a "poverty-swept" Georgia landscape, where "children are seen deformed by nature and malnutrition, women in rags beg for pennies, and men are so hungry that they eat snakes and cow-dung." According to Caldwell, the state stood idly by providing no relief as rural citizens starved. Caldwell characterized Governor Eugene Talmadge as a "dictator" who did not believe in "relief." Caldwell charged that city-dwelling Georgians denied the existence of the naked denizens of the rural areas and their "deformed, starved, and diseased" children.[62]

A subsequent Caldwell article decried the economic exploitation of rural laborers under the oppressive sharecropping system that often resulted in debt peonage.[63] Other Caldwell dispatches portrayed teenage girls dying from anemia and tenant farmers beyond the reach of government relief.[64] Caldwell's final essay was the *coup de grace*. He described a two-room house populated by three families of farm laborers. One small child, afflicted with rickets and anemia, licked an empty paper bag that held only the smell of its previous contents—hog fat. His belly was swollen with malnutrition; "he was starving to death." In the other room, two infants lay on the floor in front of the fire. With no other sustenance, they attempted to nurse from the family dog, repeatedly returning to suck "the dry teats of a mongrel bitch."[65]

Caldwell had weathered earlier criticism from Georgians for his portrayal of life in his native South in novels like *God's Little Acre* and *Tobacco Road*. During occasional visits to family, the local press grudgingly acknowledged him as "a writer of considerable note" who had "carved himself a niche in the literary hall of fame."[66] But when reports of his new crusade as muckraking reporter reached his home state, the locals took great offense. Declaring Caldwell's account "untrue" and "unfounded," they demanded an investigation of conditions in Jefferson County to disprove Caldwell's libelous portrait. Georgia boosters, "incensed" over Caldwell's "sordid tale of squalor and depravity," rose to defend their

region's wounded pride. A government relief agency bureaucrat disputed Caldwell's report, saying he was "making money at the expense of his own home people." County commissioners promised a full investigation of all families in need of assistance.[67]

Calling Caldwell's earlier work in *Tobacco Road* "grossly overdrawn," the *Augusta Chronicle* quoted in detail from the *New York Post* series, finding the conditions Caldwell depicted beyond belief. The "outstanding citizens of Jefferson County" would not allow such "wretchedness, poverty, and depravity to exist," the editorial declared. The paper demanded a grand jury investigation to prove that Caldwell was merely a turncoat sensationalist and to absolve the local citizenry of the implication that they were "heartless heathens."[68]

Some Georgians decided to take the battle north, writing directly to the *New York Post.* One man questioned Caldwell's account of men eating cow dung, saying that he had never seen such a thing, but he left open the possibility that the novelist was "referring to his own experience." The defective system of poor relief, he said, was due to the number of "Yankees" who administered the welfare system and, in an attempt to effect racial equality, distributed "much to the Negroes and little to the whites."[69]

But Caldwell's report was not unique. Another series investigating conditions in the South was begun by the Scripps-Howard news chain, and the story of "Bootleg Slavery" was featured in *Time* magazine, complete with excerpts from the Caldwell series. The magazine supported Caldwell's assessment and concluded that "a vast stretch of the South was the scene of humanity hit bottom." Conditions in the region were so bad that the inhabitants could not even get "the three M's—Meal, Molasses and Meat—a diet that nourishes pellagra but not men." Now the battle was joined in earnest.[70]

Georgians attacked the magazine, calling its repetition of the Caldwell slanders "willful exaggeration or inexcusable ignorance," "far-fetched tripe," and labeling Caldwell himself a "neurasthenic egomaniac." However, Caldwell's father, Ira, supported him, sending a telegram that asserted: "Erskine Caldwell's story essentially true."[71] A father's defense was expected, and it did little to assuage bruised Georgian pride.

The Augusta newspaper charged ahead with the promised investigation. To its surprise, it found that some families were in utter need of rehabilitation. Some, "living in want and squalor, [were] victims of

their own shiftlessness and ignorance." Ira Caldwell guided reporters to some of the farms Erskine had described, where they confirmed that some homes were "unfit for human habitation." They also uncovered "unmistakable evidences of malnutrition, disease and moral degeneration." "Several prominent citizens" agreed on "corrective measures" to address those conditions whenever they were found. Foremost on their list of solutions was "scientific sterilization" to remove society's "worst enemy, the dregs of itself."[72]

The completed investigation confirmed many details in the picture Caldwell had painted. The elder Caldwell said that such conditions were "the result of poverty and ignorance bred through generations." His own objective in assisting the investigation was to prevent "the development of such people in the future."[73] Buttressing these lay observers' conclusions, a social worker wrote that such degraded people as those Caldwell described should be sent to institutions. Their homes should be leveled and burned, she said. Setting aside sentimentality, she declared: "These people are a cancer on society, a menace to themselves and the state; and to perpetuate their condition only increases their number."[74] Blaming the victims salved the collective conscience of Caldwell's critics. *Time* summarized the controversy and the *Augusta Chronicle* reportage, which concluded that 1 percent of east Georgia's poor were outcasts from civilization and could only be treated by sterilization. By then a bill to ensure that result had passed the Georgia House and was pending before the Georgia Senate.[75] The result of the Caldwell controversy was clear to the *Augusta Chronicle.* Although they faulted the novelist, who "laundered our dirty linen and rattled the skeletons in our closet before hundreds of thousands of people," they conceded that the episode had a constructive conclusion, because "people are aroused" to find a remedy to the social ills that had been put on display. The adult members of the 10–35 families, the "flotsam and jetsam in the sea of human misery" identified in the paper's investigation, should become wards of the state, "taken care of until they themselves pass out" of existence through death. As for their children, they should be sterilized so that "their race will be extinguished with the next generation." The newspaper noted that after many years of advocacy, working "with forward looking, patriotic Georgians," the sterilization bill had been adopted by both legislative houses and was awaiting the governor's signature, representing "the first step forward

in our great social problem."[76] The bill created a state board of eugenics and allowed superintendents of state asylums to recommend candidates for sterilization. A final amendment also allowed chain gang wardens to name cases for surgery.[77]

Not everyone agreed with the legislation. The *New Republic* followed the Caldwell flap and congratulated the *Augusta Chronicle* on its "entire truthfulness" in investigating local conditions. The review proved that "there are Jeeter Lesters in the world and that something should be done to remedy the conditions under which they are forced to live."[78] Addressing rural conditions rather than the reproductive potential of the poor seemed the best course to other outside observers. But back in Georgia the *Atlanta Constitution* saluted the sterilization measure, saying it appealed to "the common sense and reason of the people." The newspaper also quoted the newly deceased Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., whose famous epigram a decade earlier signaled Supreme Court endorsement of eugenic sterilization: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."[79] Deep Southerners seldom accorded such tribute to the opinions of former officers of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Although the legislature had adopted the sterilization bill, in a pique of partisan revenge, Governor Eugene Talmadge refused to sign it. Turning to Adjutant General Lindley W. Camp, Talmadge said: "Lindley, you and I might go crazy some day and we don't want them working on us."[80] His quip underscored the personal rather than policy concerns prompting his veto. The sterilization bill was only one of the more than 165 other bills Talmadge vetoed that session.

Talmadge's veto "turned back the hands of the clock," declared the *Augusta Chronicle.* The veto was one of the governor's "most egregious mistakes," and it "struck a blow in behalf of illiteracy, degeneracy, imbecility, insanity and crime."[81] Surely the governor's spite was out of step with the best southern traditions and most forward-looking boosters' hopes. But in neighboring Alabama, Governor Bibb Graves also vetoed a sterilization bill that year, while to Georgia's northeast, a bill introduced by freshman South Carolina state legislator Strom Thurmond became law.[82] Sterilization, it seemed, was an issue intensely sensitive to local context.

After the veto of the Georgia sterilization law, Caldwell further inflamed local opinion when his 1935 dispatches from Georgia were collected

in a book entitled *Some American People.* In the book, he condemned the plan to sterilize sharecroppers and the failure of such eugenic policies, which do not "remedy the cause of the conditions" that generate social problems. While conceding that sterilization might be appropriately applied in "certain individual cases," Caldwell rejected the measure for the "thousands of Southern tenant farmers . . . in an economic condition that demands much more than superficial thought."[83] In his later work Caldwell would repeatedly emphasize the plight of poor southern sharecroppers as a situation that could be improved without resort to surgical intervention.

With a new governor in place in 1937, legislators from Caldwell's home county reintroduced the sterilization bill, which passed the Georgia House of Representatives easily.[84] Then, "without comment or debate," the Senate unanimously adopted the measure, designed "for immunization from procreation of all insane persons and habitual criminals."[85] When the legislative session ended, Governor E. D. Rivers signed the bill without fanfare, making Georgia the final state to adopt a eugenic sterilization law.[86] The *Journal of the Georgia Medical Society* applauded the law as an appropriate step to address the "constant increase in the tax burden."[87]

In 1936, photographer Margaret Bourke-White toured the South with Caldwell collecting images for another book, *You Have Seen Their Faces.*[88] The book's illustrations included actual pictures of the Bungler clan, revealed first in the journal *Eugenics,* then immortalized as fiction in *Tobacco Road. You Have Seen Their Faces* was condemned in Augusta as "balderdash" and "propaganda."[89]

When the stage version of *Tobacco Road* was scheduled to play in Augusta, the sheriff from Caldwell's home town of Wrens wrote to protest.[90] The play was received "with good nature and applause" in Augusta, but in Atlanta, a new municipal censorship board banned the play as "sacrilegious" and "generally vulgar and profane."[91]

In 1940, as *Tobacco Road* was ending its record-setting seven-year run on Broadway, Ira Caldwell traveled to Washington to meet government officials in an attempt to lure money for a "rehabilitation community" that would lift the inhabitants of the real "Tobacco Road" out of poverty. Revisiting the family that he first described as the "Bunglers," the elder Caldwell tried once again to better their lot. If they were provided with

medicine to "wipe out their malaria" and had access to "clean and sturdy houses surrounded by a few fertile acres," they could "lift themselves out of their dilemma," Caldwell argued.[92]

By then *Tobacco Road* had found a new incarnation as a movie, and the senior Caldwell acted as tour guide to Hollywood filmmakers who visited the region looking for authentic settings for the film.[93] With an eye to a possible windfall for the local economy, the people of eastern Georgia seemed to forget their irritation with Erskine Caldwell. The Augusta Merchants Association endorsed plans to bring the world premiere of the movie to town.[94] The local paper felt the "violent controversy" had passed and there would be no protest.[95]

But the flap was hardly over. Some theater patrons were disappointed that the film had been stripped of the salty language that provided such scandal in the book and the play.[96] On the other hand, the mayor of Augusta complained that it was "the most degrading and unwholesome film" he had ever seen. Perhaps more important, it portrayed his city as a small "backwoods community" rather than the bustling metropolis of more than 100,000 souls that it now was. Although he instructed the city attorney to sue the movie producers for $500,000 for their slanderous portrayal of Augusta, Caldwell apparently did not take the threat seriously, and nothing came of the lawsuit.[97] Erskine Caldwell, known for so long as the narrator for the "unwashed, unshaved, unclothed, uneducated, and unintelligent white trash of a poverty stricken district," left the "verminous Georgia loafers" of *Tobacco Road* behind.[98]

No evidence remains of a federal response to Ira Caldwell's pleas; he died a few years later just as World War II was coming to an end, with the country in the middle of its long climb out of the Great Depression.[99] During the next three decades, some 3,300 Georgians endured surgery under Georgia's sterilization law. Though it was in place only 33 years, in a tally of surgical statistics, Georgia ranks fifth among all states in the total number of eugenic operations. Between 1950 and 1960, approximately 200 involuntary operations occurred every year at the state's mental hospital. In 1959 a Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative series revealed that sterilizations at Georgia's Central State Hospital had been performed routinely on any patient of childbearing age and that the surgeries were often done not by a doctor but by a nurse. An advisory committee later recommended that all eugenic sterilizations be discontinued.[100]

In 1966, new legislation was written sanctioning voluntary sterilization for purposes of birth control for married couples.[101] Additional amendments to those provisions eventually led to elimination of the law for eugenic sterilization, which was repealed in 1970.[102]

In 2007, the Georgia Senate passed a resolution of "profound regret" for eugenic sterilization legislation. The resolution leveled blame for passage of the 1937 measure at "Darwinian principles" along with "progressive" academicians, scientists, politicians, and newspaper editors; those with "religious" objections were credited with opposing it.[103] No mention was made of Erskine Caldwell or the Bunglers of *Tobacco Road.*

NOTES

1. Martin Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54.

2. Some studies that have highlighted eugenic themes in literature are Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sylvia J. Cook, "Modernism from the Bottom Up," in *Reading Erskine Caldwell: New Essays,* ed. Robert L. McDonald (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006); and Karen Ann Keely, "The Pure Products of America: Eugenics and Narrative in the Age of Sterilization" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1999).

3. Among the most cited popular fiction that includes references to eugenics are Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Arrowsmith* (1925); F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925); and Ernest Hemingway, *Torrents of Spring* (1926). Fitzgerald began his references to eugenics as a student at Princeton, where he wrote the lyrics for a ditty entitled "Love or Eugenics" for a Triangle Club production. Banned from participating in the play due to poor academic performance, Fitzgerald appeared in drag, dressed as a chorus girl. See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi! A Facsimile of the 1914 Acting Script and Musical Score* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

4. This connection is suggested, for example, in Dan B. Miller's biography *Erskine Caldwell: The Journey from Tobacco Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 219.

5. Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

6. Karen A. Keely, "Poverty, Sterilization, and Eugenics in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road,*" *Journal of American Studies* 36 (2002): 23–42; Betsy L. Nies, "Defending Jeeter," in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s,* ed. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 120–39.

7. W. E. Gonzales, "National Corn Exposition and Its Big Meaning," *Atlanta Constitution,* January 25, 1913; "Need of Child Welfare Exhibit Is Arousing Much Interest," *Atlanta Constitution,* September 21, 1913.

8. "Eugenics for Atlanta Is Strong Prediction," *Atlanta Constitution,* November 19, 1914.

9. A. T. Spaulding Jr., "How Mendel's Laws Discredit Eugenics," *Atlanta Constitution,* March 9, 1914. The Better Babies gave way to the more formally organized Fitter Family contests run by the American Eugenics Society. In 1924, an important year for Georgia eugenics, the family of a school principal took the gold medal at the Fitter Families contest at the Georgia State Fair. See "School Principal and Family Take Fair Top Honors," *Savannah Press,* November 6, 1924.

10. "Britain Is Opposed to Eugenics in Schools," *Atlanta Constitution,* January 9, 1914.

11. "No Eugenics in Schools," editorial, *Atlanta Constitution,* January 11, 1914.

12. Paul Jones, "Governor and Mayor Are Lauded by Sunday," *Atlanta Constitution,* November 5, 1917.

13. "Damaged Goods," *Atlanta Constitution,* January 8, 1916.

14. "Walter Andrews Now Believer in Eugenics," *Atlanta Constitution,* January 2, 1916.

15. "Eugenics Bill Bitterly Fought by Senator Kea," *Atlanta Constitution,* July 13, 1920.

16. "Kill Marriage Bill after Two Day Fight: Senators Defeat Bill Requiring Certificate of Health before Issuance of License," *Atlanta Constitution,* July 14, 1920.

17. "Eugenics Bill Rejected," *Washington Post,* August 2, 1921; "Kennedy Offers Eugenics Bill," *Atlanta Constitution,* July 7, 1923; "Legislators Open Determined Plan to Clear Slate," *Atlanta Constitution,* July 20, 1924.

18. *Journal of the Medical Association of Georgia* 17 (1928): 308–309.

19. Ellis Parker Butler, "Suzanne on Race Tinkering," *Atlanta Constitution,* June 7, 1914.

20. "Racial Integrity as a National Question," editorial, *Atlanta Constitution,* February 7, 1907.

21. "Racial Marriage a National Problem," editorial, *Atlanta Constitution,* August 21, 1908.

22. "The Two Go Hand in Hand," editorial, *Atlanta Constitution,* June 21, 1914.

23. "The Public Health Bill," *Atlanta Constitution,* July 12, 1914.

24. Paul A. Lombardo, "Miscegenation, Eugenics & Racism: Historical Footnotes to *Loving v. Virginia*," *University of California, Davis Law Review* 21 (1988): 422–52.

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26. James C. Davis to John Powell, May 25, 1925, John Powell Papers, University of Virginia [hereafter Powell Papers].

27. "Appeal Is Made to Keep Blood of Whites Pure," *Atlanta Constitution,* February 13, 1924.

28. Powell to Davis, May 30, 1925, Powell Papers.

29. Sam W. Small, "Wide Interest Is Aroused in Racial Integrity Bill," *Atlanta Constitution,* June 28, 1925.

30. Davis to Powell, August 22, 1927, Powell Papers.

31. Dr. G. I. Garrard, cited in Peter G. Cranford, *But for the Grace of God: The Inside Story of the World's Largest Insane Asylum, Milledgeville!* (Augusta, Ga.: Great Pyramid Press, 1981), 68.

32. "Doctors of Georgia Plan Bill for Sterilization of the Criminally Insane," *Atlanta Constitution,* April 18, 1913; "A Worthy Measure," *Atlanta Constitution,* May 30, 1913. One out-of-state advocate of eugenic surgery described the operation as the solution for the "vexing negro problem." Since more than 50 percent of all convicted criminals are blacks, he said, sterilization of the prison population would necessarily apply primarily to that group. "Declares Sterilization Is Solution of Negro Problem," *Atlanta Constitution,* April 20, 1913.

33. W. L. Champion, "Sterilization of Confirmed Criminals, Idiots, Rapists, Feeble-Minded, and Other Defectives," *Journal of the Medical Association of Georgia* 3 (1913): 112–14, at 113.

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44. I. S. Caldwell, "The Eugenics Question," *Augusta Chronicle,* May 20, 1929; I. S. Caldwell, "Are We Going Up or Down?" *Augusta Chronicle,* December 5, 1929.

45. Miller, *The Journey from Tobacco Road,* 125.

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47. Ibid., 207.

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52. Erskine Caldwell, "Georgia Cracker," *Haldeman-Julius Monthly* 4 (November 1926): 39–43, at 41.

53. Caldwell, *Call It Experience,* 81.

54. See, for example, "Erskine Caldwell: Phenomenon," *Gastonia (N.C.) Daily Gazette,* March 2, 1935 ("a notch above the filthy little sex booklets"; "nice picking for the literary rag man"; designed for "the entertainment of sex-greedy filth scavengers").

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79. "Sterilization Bill Passes the House," *Atlanta Constitution,* March 9, 1935.

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81. "The Governor's Veto of the Sterilization Bill," *Augusta Chronicle,* March 27, 1935.

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88. Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937).

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96. Harry Gage, "Augustans Are Disappointed in 'Tobacco Road' Picture," *Augusta Chronicle,* March 4, 1941.

97. "Augusta Mayor Lambasts Makers of 'Tobacco Road,'" *Augusta Chronicle,* March 6, 1941; "Work to Begin on Suit against 'Tobacco Road,'" *Augusta Chronicle,* March 15, 1941.

98. George Tucker, "New York," *Augusta Chronicle,* June 19, 1941.

99. "Rev. I. S. Caldwell Dies in Columbia," *Augusta Chronicle,* August 18, 1944.

100. A series of letters from the former legal counsel to the Medical Association of Georgia clarify the events that led to passage of the voluntary sterilization law as well as the eventual repeal of the Georgia eugenic sterilization act. See John. L. Moore Jr. to Julius Paul, October 10, 1968, November 4, 1968, and February 22, 1972, copies in possession of the author. See also Gayle White, "Involuntary Sterilization in Georgia: Why Did It Happen?" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* February 4, 2007.

101. "Voluntary Sterilization Act," *Georgia Acts* 1966, p. 453.

102. "Voluntary Sterilization Act," *Georgia Acts* 1970, p. 683. The 1970 law retained provisions for sterilization of people who are "irreversibly and incurably mentally incompetent" and could not raise children safely. That law was successfully challenged and declared unconstitutional for failing to provide procedural and evidentiary protections for those subject to sterilization. See *Motes v. Hall County Department of Children and Family Services,* 251 Ga. 373, 1983. The faulty provisions were amended, and current Georgia law continues to allow sterilization of the mentally disabled following a court order.

103. *Georgia Senate Resolution 247* (2007), "Expressing profound regret for Georgia's participation in the eugenics movement in the United States." For details of the resolution and the political machinations that accompanied it, see Paul A. Lombardo, "Disability, Eugenics, and the Culture Wars," *St. Louis University Journal of Health Law and Policy* 2 (2009): 57–79.