

# ***Race Regeneration and Social Purity. A Study of the Social Attitudes of Canada's English-Speaking Suffragists***

by Carol BACCHI\*

## I

Feminist historians have recently pointed out that the female suffragists in Canada, Britain, the United States, and Australia had aims very different from today's liberation movement.<sup>1</sup> Attention has been drawn in particular to two facets of the women's ideology. First, the vast majority accepted that woman's most important contribution to society consisted of her role as wife and mother. As a result they usually assumed that a woman would stop working at marriage, to devote her full energy to her family. Second, rather than demanding sexual freedom for women, most upheld the Victorian idea that women stood above sex.

Though this synopsis of their social attitudes is accurate, little attempt has been made to understand why they held these views. This paper argues from the position that the women have to be understood within the context of the social group to which they belonged. Canada's English-speaking suffragists were members of a late nineteenth-century reform coalition drawn from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle classes.<sup>2</sup> Such middle-class reformers suggested only minor changes. The family, for instance, remained sacrosanct in their eyes. The suffragists did not want to challenge the accepted female role but only to raise its status.

This paper examines two parts of the reform ideology: the commitment to race regeneration and the crusade for social purity. It shows how both these goals depended on traditional views of women's virtues. The desire to create a strong and healthy race placed an emphasis on woman's role as procreator and nurturer. The crusade for purity, an attempt by the Protestant elite to reimpose its values on a deviant society, made a patriotic virtue of women's asexuality. Given the suffragists'

\* Department of History, University of Newcastle, New South Wales.

<sup>1</sup> Aileen KRADITOR, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971); Anne SUMMERS, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Victoria: Penguin Books, 1975); C. ROVER, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866-1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967); R. DALZIEL, "The Colonial Helpmeet: Women's Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of History* (October 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Carol BACCHI, "Liberation Deferred: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918" (Ph. D. dissertation, McGill University, 1976). In the thesis the instigators of the suffrage societies and some of their followers are described as more feminists than social reformers. This paper is not concerned with these since they were a distinct minority.

Protestant Anglo-Saxon background it ought not to be surprising that they endorsed this programme. Their allegiance to their sex was not their sole allegiance. In fact, at times, the commitment to race, creed, and class superceded the commitment to sex.

## II

Several studies of late Victorian and Edwardian society point to the fact that the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon community in Britain, its colonies, and the United States, felt defensive in this period.<sup>3</sup> Britain faced the particular trauma of declining imperial supremacy. The number of recruits for the Boer War who were rejected on the grounds of physical incapacity seemed to indicate that the British were becoming a race of weaklings. Bernard Semmel has labelled the reforms advanced in this period to upgrade the health of the population "social imperialism".<sup>4</sup>

The "race suicide" scare, the suggestion that Anglo-Saxon numbers were declining while "inferior" races proliferated, aroused particular concern. The old Malthusian fear that too many people were being born gave way to the idea that the English population had stopped growing. The problem was not simply numbers, though it was frequently expressed in this way. The real problem was that the best stock were being outbred by the unfit. Studies, for example, revealed an increasing number of feeble-minded in the population.

Canada's middle-class reformers came from sound Anglo-Saxon stock and were well aware of the warnings about the degeneration of the race. Social gospel leaders S. D. Chown and W. W. Andrews viewed with alarm "the diminishing birth rate in some sections of our population". They considered it a great national evil "that some of the best strains in our country are becoming extinct".<sup>5</sup> The large influx of eastern and southern European immigrants between 1896 and World War I increased their anxiety. Much of the reform programme aimed at finding ways to improve the calibre of tomorrow's citizens. A commitment to race-regeneration and nation-building dominated the movement.

The idea of evolution aroused interest since it seemed to suggest that the race was moving forward. All they had to do was harness this process. Unfortunately, scientists could not agree upon the mechanism by which evolution took place. Two contrary theories developed. Environmentalism, traceable to Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, maintained that a modification in the environment produced in a person visible physical and mental changes which were transmittable to the next generation. The opposing

<sup>3</sup> Ronald HYAM, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976); G. R. SEARLE, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard SEMMEL, *Imperialism and Social Reform* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Graeme DECARIE, "The Prohibition Movement in Ontario, 1894-1916" (Ph. D. dissertation, Queen's University, 1972), p. 261.

school of thought, labelled "eugenics" by its founder, Francis Galton, placed emphasis on nature (i.e. heredity) rather than nurture.<sup>6</sup>

The two schools of heredity offered different solutions to the race-degeneration and race-suicide problems. Lamarckians and neo-Lamarckians believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics and recommended ameliorative legislation to improve the living and working conditions of underprivileged groups. According to their hypothesis this would produce higher types in the future. The simple answer to the birth-rate dilemma lay in reducing the infant death rate by upgrading the standard of living generally. Discounting the impact of environment, eugenicists insisted that the only way to improve the race was through selective breeding. They advocated legislation to prevent the unfit from multiplying and to encourage the fit to have more children.

The middle-class reformers tended to be humanists who defended the need for environmental change. Environmentalism (or "euthenics" as it came to be called in contradistinction to eugenics<sup>7</sup>) provided them with a *raison d'être* since it suggested that people living today could build for the future. But eugenics seemed to make social reform unnecessary. Worse still, it implied that reformers were actually contributing to the deterioration of the race by preserving weak specimens.<sup>8</sup>

Some reformers rejected eugenics outright since it seemed to deny their effectiveness. The Rev. A. E. Smith, a Methodist minister from Brandon, Manitoba, and an exponent of the social gospel, felt uncomfortable with the new creed: "We do not believe in the survival of the fittest. We do not believe in the brushing on one side of the weak and the helpless."<sup>9</sup> Others took up those parts of eugenics which retained environmental overtones, for example restricting the propagation of those with hereditary defects. Beyond this, they retained their faith in the benefits of environmental change.

Dr. Peter Bryce, the President of the Canadian Purity-Education Association, provides a good example of this ability to integrate some eugenic arguments without abandoning a basically environmental approach. To control the spread of hereditary weakness he recommended stricter

<sup>6</sup> The theory of acquired characteristics had been unchallenged until the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1869 Galton published *Hereditary Genius* which stressed the hereditary aspects of human existence and society. In 1883 the German embryologist and geneticist, August Weissman, developed his "germ-plasm" theory which completely denied the impact of environment. The rediscovery of Mendel in 1900 strengthened the allegiance to hereditary determinism. Donald K. PICKENS, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), p. 26; Hans STUBBE, *History of Genetics* (Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1972), p. 176; A. H. STURTEVANT, *A History of Genetics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Mark H. HALLER, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth M. LUDMERER, *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Appraisal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. A. E. SMITH, "Cutting Down an Evil Tree" in SOCIAL SERVICE CONGRESS OF CANADA, *Report of the Proceedings and Addresses* (Toronto, 1914), p. 204.

government regulation of marriage and the removal of the feeble-minded to state-supported homes. In the field of eugenics he called for a "sanitary environment," improved housing, lessening of overcrowding, a reduction in local taxation and child labour, and lower costs for food and land. Bryce coined his own terms for the complementary processes. The "Law of Heredity" doomed men and women to carry their ancestral physical structure and character with them. But the "Gospel of Heredity" mitigated the doom, providing in environment the "potentialities of almost infinite improvement".<sup>10</sup>

Because of their reform orientation the suffragists also placed more faith in environment than in genes. Emily Stowe, the founder of Canada's first woman suffrage society, for example, blamed the environment, not heredity, for the production of the criminal.<sup>11</sup> Most reforms in the suffrage platform (factory legislation, compulsory education, city planning, health and hygiene, temperance, prison reform, pure food laws) were eugenicist and aimed at improving the living and working conditions of the poor.<sup>12</sup>

As with the reformers, however, the suffragists could not ignore the discoveries of genetics. Ethel Hurlbatt, a vocal member of the Montreal Suffrage Association and Warden of McGill's Royal Victoria College in 1907, explained clearly the dilemma posed by eugenics and the way in which it challenged the basic assumption of reform:

Is degeneracy in every form to be attributed to poverty bad housing, unhealthy trades, drinking, industrial occupations of women and other direct and indirect environmental influences on offspring? Can we, by education, by legislation, by social effort change the environmental conditions and raise the race to a markedly higher standard of physique and mentality? Or is social reform really incapable of effecting any substantial change, nay by lessening the selection death rate, may it not contribute to emphasizing the very evils it was intended to lessen?...

Through investigations they [eugenicists] show that improvement in social conditions will not compensate for bad hereditary influences; that the problem of physical and mental degeneration cannot be solved by preventing mothers from working, by closing public houses, by erecting model dwellings; that the only way to keep a nation strong mentally and physically is to see that each new generation is derived from the fitter members of the generation before.<sup>13</sup>

Placed on the defensive the suffragists also proposed a compromise. They accepted that environmental reform could not affect mental capacity and therefore agreed upon the need to control strictly the breeding of the retarded. One Western woman wanted special industrial farms, segregation of the sexes, and in some cases sterilization to keep the feeble-minded from multiplying.<sup>14</sup> In the East, Constance Hamilton, the Pres-

<sup>10</sup> Peter H. BRYCE, M. D., "The Ethical Problems Underlying the Social Evil," reprinted from the *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Sociology*, Toronto (March 1914), p. 13. Bryce was also the Chief Medical Officer for the Department of Immigration, Ottawa.

<sup>11</sup> Waterloo Lutheran University Archives, Emily Stowe Papers, Scrapbook III, undated (c. 1897) letter from Stowe to the editor of the *Toronto Mail*.

<sup>12</sup> BACCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 234-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Montreal Witness*, 12 Oct. 1910.

<sup>14</sup> Archives of Saskatchewan, Mrs S. V. Haight Papers, Drafts of Speeches, undated speech on feeble-minded.

ident of the National Equal Franchise Union, included drunkards among the unsalvageable. She recommended keeping them under restraint rather than leaving alcoholic mothers "free to fill cradles with degenerate babies".<sup>15</sup>

Beyond the regulation of the feeble-minded, however, most suffragists were unwilling to go. Strict eugenists were few. Only Carrie Derick, a student in McGill's Botanical Department between 1887 and 1890, and later a Professor of Evolution and Genetics, championed the direct application of scientific principles to human conditions. That is, she believed that the struggle for existence ought to be allowed to proceed unrestrained, so that the truly fittest would survive. She preferred a "spirit of indifference" to the "happy feeling" that education, pure air, good housing, proper food, and short hours of work may bring about a permanent improvement in people.<sup>16</sup> To justify her activities as a reformer and a suffragist, she argued that "If men and women were taught to be chaste, clean living and high thinking, there would be an uplifting of the race without any special legislation."<sup>17</sup> The higher education of women and the freeing of women from conventional ideas, Derick maintained, would help achieve this aim.

Generally, the application of theories of evolution, be they eugenist or environmental, tended to reinforce traditional sex roles. The obsession with the numbers and quality of the next generation accentuated woman's maternal function. The particular reforms one espoused depended on the school of heredity to which one belonged. The environmentalists concentrated on two things: improving the health and fitness of women on the grounds that their children would benefit and bettering the home environment in which those children would spend the first crucial formative years. The eugenists tried to popularize the idea of controlled breeding. The suffragists almost invariably favoured the Lamarckian programme, firstly because they were environmentalists, and secondly because it allowed greater scope for women to contribute actively to the creation of a new race.

Eugenics reduced the maternal function to a mere biological capacity. The main concern for the future of the race, according to eugenic theory, was that those with hereditary defects were multiplying faster than those with desirable traits. The source of this problem was traced partly to the reluctance of intelligent women to stay home and have babies. Statistics revealed a lower marriage and birth rate among college women, proving to eugenists that these women were neglecting their duty.<sup>18</sup> Francis Galton, the well-known founder of the movement, was willing to force this duty upon them: "If child-bearing women must be intellectually handicapped," he explained, "then the penalty to be paid for race predominance is the subjection of women."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF CANADA, *Annual Report* (1912), p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Montreal Witness*, 23 Feb. 1912.

<sup>17</sup> *Montreal Star*, 24 Oct. 1914.

<sup>18</sup> Mark HALLER, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> SEMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

This conclusion raised a real dilemma for the suffragists. Since most were well-educated and since they shared the concern for the future of the race, what could they say to those who accused them of not doing their share? Ethel Hurlbatt did some soul-searching over the issue:

If the philanthropists are right, there is no doubt that college women are contributing their share to movements which will secure better physical and moral conditions for the race. If the eugenists are right, are college women? Do college women maintain the same standard of physical efficiency as their less educated sisters? Do they as readily marry? Do they bring into the world as many children?<sup>20</sup>

She could only hope that the "philanthropists" (or environmentalists) were right since that made women's contribution to the reform effort as important as their breeding function. Hurlbatt is not suggesting that female reformers might want to abandon the domestic sphere but that the improved environment they were helping to create was of more value than the simple multiplication of offspring. Environmental theory thus allowed a greater scope for activity, albeit within a restricted domain.

In a similar fashion the environmental approach to bettering the race was partly responsible for altering the traditional image of the Victorian woman. A belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics produced a new concern for both woman's physical and mental fitness. The "frail vessel" fell into disrepute. Dr. Edward Playter, an Ottawa reformer, announced that "the age for regarding as fashionable and popular delicate women and girls is past."<sup>21</sup> It had become "a woman's duty to be well."<sup>22</sup>

The dress-reform movement received a real fillip from this idea. Many medical men approved looser-fitting garments on the grounds that the "corset curse" might damage the womb and/or its occupant.<sup>23</sup> More and more educators began to press for physical education facilities for girls in order to improve the health of future mothers. All the new women's colleges in the period, such as the Royal Victoria College in Montreal, had large recreation rooms where women learned calisthenics.

Environmentalism could also be used to justify women's higher education. Many people, including many clerics, had begun to criticize the traditional academy education, which concentrated on needlework, dancing, and languages, on the grounds that it produced a flighty and frivolous woman. According to one champion of women's higher education, McGill's Principal William Dawson, the mental discipline of future wives and mothers had to be improved since the children were in their

<sup>20</sup> *Montreal Witness*, 12 Oct. 1910.

<sup>21</sup> Edward PLAYTER, M. D., "The Physical Culture of Women," in *Woman; her Character, Culture and Calling*, ed. Rev. B. F. Austin (Ontario: Book and Bible House, 1890), p. 225.

<sup>22</sup> DOMINION WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN TEMPERANCE UNION (W.C.T.U.), *Annual Report* (1891), Department of Heredity and Hygiene, p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> John S. and Robin M. HALLER, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 146.

care all day.<sup>24</sup> This logic made university-level courses in moral philosophy, history, and Christian doctrine quite acceptable. But the education was still essentially education for motherhood. There was no suggestion that better educated women move into the job market.

While the environmental approach encouraged women to break free from certain parts of Victorian convention, on balance the Lamarckian school reinforced traditional sex roles. Women were simply allowed the liberty to become better mothers. This is aptly demonstrated by the reformers' enthusiastic support for domestic science education for women. Since the home life was crucial to the physical and mental development of an individual, they wanted more attention paid to the training of the homemaker. J. W. Dafoe, editor of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, believed that the health of the nation depended upon "the proper balancing of foods in the bill of fare" and that, upon its health depended its achievements in commerce, arts, and science. In brief, "the gastric organs are the hub of the wheel."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, above all else, women needed instruction in physiology, hygiene, and nutrition.

The idea of domestic science training fitted in nicely with developments in education theory. Towards the end of the nineteenth century many educators began promoting a practical over a general liberal arts programme.<sup>26</sup> It was argued that the strength of the nation required that boys receive technical education in industrial schools. On the same grounds and given the traditional assumptions about the sexual division of labour it was decided that girls needed training in the skills of household management. Between 1893 and 1908 home economics classes were established in the public schools of thirty-two Canadian cities.<sup>27</sup> In 1894 the Hamilton School of Domestic Science opened and in 1900 a Hamilton Normal School for training teachers of domestic science was established, with government aid.<sup>28</sup>

The reaction of the suffragists to domestic science provides a good example of the way in which they accepted and worked within the reform ideology. Because of their enthusiasm for improving the race, the majority warmly approved the new education. In 1889 Emily Stowe asked for the incorporation of one grand Normal School for domestic instruction in every city.<sup>29</sup> The Manitoba suffragist and journalist, Lillian Beynon Thomas, wanted girls in public schools to receive a thorough training in domestic science because, in her words, "the health of the nation is largely

<sup>24</sup> Suse WOOLF, "Women at McGill: the Ladies' Education Association of Montreal" McGill University, 1971, p. 9, (mimeographed).

<sup>25</sup> *Grain Growers' Guide*, 14 Oct. 1914.

<sup>26</sup> R. J. W. SELLECK, *The New Education, 1870-1914* (London: Isaac Putnam and Sons, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> Mary Q. INNIS, *The Clear Spirit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 109.

<sup>28</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF CANADA, *Women of Canada: Their Life and Their Work*, ed. Ishbel Aberdeen, (Paris International Exhibition, 1900), p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Emily Stowe Papers, *op. cit.* Scrapbook IV, article entitled "Housewifery", (May, 1889).

in their hands."<sup>30</sup> Only a small feminist minority realized that home economics restricted women to a purely domestic function: Carrie Derick saw the danger in the new trend. She pointed out that centring woman's education around cooking and sewing restricted her choice of career.<sup>31</sup> The majority accepted this restriction.

The general acceptance of domestic science ought not to be surprising. The suffragists shared the concern for the race which made it necessary that the home life of the masses be improved. Also, the idea of scientific training for motherhood provided a new status for a role most of them accepted. In the eyes of the Manitoba suffragist Mrs. Frances Graham, home economics had dignified the old-time "kitchen drudgery" into a delightful and controlled science.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, few suffragists did their own housework and domestic science education promised to replenish the ever-diminishing supply of domestic servants.

Other parts of the suffrage programme illustrate the priority placed on racial improvement. Their arguments in favour of factory legislation were essentially racial, that is, that women had to be kept healthy to protect their offspring. The Toronto Suffrage Association, for example, included among its list of reasons why women needed the vote "... because millions of women are wage workers and their health and that of *our future citizens* are often endangered by evil working conditions that can only be remedied by legislation."<sup>33</sup> In the early days of sweatshop labour some safeguards were necessary, but the suffragists failed to consider that protective legislation burdened a working woman with a handicap which made her less employable. Only a very few suffragists, notably Carrie Derick, argued the modern feminist position that restrictive legislation tended to drive women out of work they were well able to perform.<sup>34</sup> Ideally, the majority of the suffragists wanted women out of the factories altogether because of the threat such work posed to their health.

This is not to say that the suffragists allowed the male reformers to define their programme but that they accepted the need for racial improvement and hence had no intention of challenging the importance of woman as mother. The motto adopted by the Child Welfare Exhibition, sponsored by the Montreal Suffrage Association in 1912, could well stand as the motto for the suffrage movement: "If we are to become a great nation, the well-being of our children must be our first care."<sup>35</sup>

Within this framework the women demanded the esteem they deserved as the "mothers of the race". To justify their enfranchisement, they put forward the simple plea that they needed a vote to protect their homes and children properly. Industrialization, they argued, had intruded

<sup>30</sup> *Winnipeg Free Press*, 8 Apr. 1916.

<sup>31</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN, *Report* (1904), p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> *Grain Growers' Guide*, 27 Sept. 1911.

<sup>33</sup> Victoria College Library, Emily Stowe Papers, Scrapbook VI, Printer flier, "Votes for Women! The Woman's Reason."

<sup>34</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, 27 March 1912.

<sup>35</sup> Child Welfare Exhibition, *Souvenir Handbook*, 8-22 Oct. 1912.

into woman's sphere and transferred many of her functions to distant, impersonal, collective enterprises.<sup>36</sup> Factories made the food and clothing; schools educated the children; governments controlled the environment which affected her family's health. To guarantee that these tasks, which were actually her responsibilities, were performed well, woman needed to intrude into the world. Government had become housekeeping on a grand scale and women were still the most natural housekeepers.

The suffragists were thus able to capitalize on the paranoia over the deterioration of the race to raise their status. They sensibly aligned themselves with the environmentalists who at least promoted women above the level of breeding stock. But the obsession with racial perfection made woman's maternal and nurturant functions far more important than any contribution she could make outside the home. This helps explain why very few suffragists suggested a serious restructuring of sex roles.

### III

Social purity formed one of the most persistent themes running through both the suffrage and the general reform movements. According to David Pivar, it provided "the moral cement that gave cohesiveness to otherwise disassociated reforms".<sup>37</sup> Its central role tells us a great deal about the reform ideology and helps us understand the suffragists' prudery.

As with race regeneration, social purity was essentially defensive. The style of city living, brought on by the rapid urbanization of the end of the century, challenged the standards of the Protestant middle class. The numbers of foreigners who congregated in urban slums increased the feeling that they had lost control of the nation's character. Richard Hofstadter's "status anxiety" still best describes their attitude.<sup>38</sup>

The most visible signs of disregard for the Christian way of life were the bar-rooms and the brothels. Numerous studies of the temperance campaign describe the reaction to the first of these and show how it aided the suffrage movement.<sup>39</sup> Only a few historians have examined the second.

Social purity crusaders concentrated predominantly upon the problem of prostitution which seemed to embody the challenge to Christian morality. Social gospel preachers and civic leaders complained ceaselessly about the degree of "social vice" rampant in Canada. In 1894 Rev. W. J. Hunter reported that Montreal with a population of 220,000 supported

<sup>36</sup> BACCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> David J. PIVAR, "The New Abolitionism: The Quest for Social Purity" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1965).

<sup>38</sup> Richard HOFSTADTER, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

<sup>39</sup> DECARIE, *op. cit.*; John H. THOMPSON, "The Prohibition Question in Manitoba" (M. A. dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1969); Robert Irwin MACLEAN, "A 'Most Effectual' Remedy: Temperance and Prohibition in Alberta, 1875-1915" (M. A. dissertation, University of Calgary, 1969); Albert J. HIEBERT, "Prohibition in British Columbia" (M. A. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1969).

228 "houses of shame".<sup>40</sup> J. S. Woodsworth drew attention to the problem in the West where, in 1911, Winnipeg had one hundred and fifty houses of ill-fame.<sup>41</sup>

Prostitution raised an additional problem for reformers dedicated to improving the race: venereal disease. Syphilis and gonorrhoea reportedly had reached staggering proportions. Dr. Charles Hastings, Toronto's public health inspector, quoted the ominous findings of the 1901 New York State Commission of Seven which concluded that one New Yorker in five had venereal disease.<sup>42</sup> (Canadian reformers often looked to the United States to forecast their future.) The Alberta reformer, Emily Murphy, indicated the deteriorating situation in Canada. She found that one in three prisoners in Alberta's Provincial jail had to be treated for syphilis and gonorrhoea.<sup>43</sup>

The impact on future generations magnified the seriousness of these diseases. In 1905 Fritz Schaudinn and Erich Hoffman discovered the spirochete which caused syphilis and proved that it could be transmitted from an infected mother to an unborn baby.<sup>44</sup> Subsequent studies claimed that syphilis produced other afflictions including insanity, paralysis, blindness, deformity, and sterility in the victim and the victim's offspring. Lillian Beynon Thomas blamed syphilis for 50% of all mental deficiency.<sup>45</sup> Dr. Hastings attributed to gonorrhoeal infection 20 to 25% of all blindness, 17 to 25% of all sterility, and 60 to 80% of all miscarriages.<sup>46</sup>

Science proved no more helpful than in the heredity debate for, while it could list all the deplorable side-effects of venereal disease, it could offer no cure. One treatment for syphilis, doses of mercury, used as early as 1497, killed many patients and made the medicine as dangerous as the disease. Arsphenamine or salvarsen, a derivative of arsenic, developed in 1910, proved more successful but a clinical cure still required repeated injections over a period of one and a half years.<sup>47</sup> Some stages of later syphilis proved refractory to all forms of therapy. Although Albert Neisser discovered the organism which caused gonorrhoea in 1879, no effective treatment was developed until the 1940s.<sup>48</sup> Municipal authorities in Europe, Britain, and in some American cities tried to control the problem by segregating prostitutes and subjecting them to compulsory medical inspection. The British Contagious Diseases Acts, introduced

<sup>40</sup> Rev. W. J. HUNTER, *Manhood Wrecked and Rescued* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1894), p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> J. S. WOODSWORTH, *My Neighbour* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Reprint, 1972), Chapter 8.

<sup>42</sup> SOCIAL SERVICE CONGRESS, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>43</sup> Emily MURPHY, *The Black Candle* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1922), p. 307.

<sup>44</sup> William J. BROWN, M. D., *Syphilis: A Synopsis* (Washington: Public Health Service Publications, 1968), pp. 9-11.

<sup>45</sup> *Winnipeg Free Press*, 3 July 1915.

<sup>46</sup> SOCIAL SERVICE CONGRESS, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> BROWN, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> D. LLEWELLYN-JONES, *Sex and Venereal Disease* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 42.

between 1864 and 1869, constituted a test case of social supervision.<sup>49</sup> But the Puritan reformers would not support this technique which they interpreted as state sanctioning of moral evil. In any case the idea of regulation was doomed to failure for a far more practical reason: it failed to work. Prostitution simply went underground and venereal disease statistics rose.<sup>50</sup>

The reformers decided to attack the problem at its source and launched a crusade for the general reformation of the nation's morals. Several Canadian reform organizations joined in the purity crusade. Between 1906 and 1915 a Purity-Education Association, staffed mainly by doctors, operated out of Toronto.<sup>51</sup> A second group, the National Committee for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, founded in 1912, fought against the international trade in prostitutes. Social purity also operated as a subsidiary theme in associations committed to other causes. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, had committees for press and literature censorship, as well as those dedicated to eliminating white slavery and the "social evil."<sup>52</sup>

The reformers adopted several types of tactics. For the "fallen" they could only suggest that they be prevented from transmitting the disease to others. In 1912 the Methodist Church demanded that all cases of venereal disease be reported to Medical Health officers and that no one be granted a marriage licence until he or she could produce a medical certificate that established freedom from venereal disease.<sup>53</sup> Dr. Hastings suggested the provision of public laboratories where Wasserman tests (discovered in 1906) could be carried out.<sup>54</sup> In 1918 Mary McCallum, then woman's editor for the *Grain Growers' Guide*, recommended the strictest and closest quarantine of venereal disease patients.<sup>55</sup> For those yet to fall, the strategy included censorship and sex education. The logic behind the latter was that, if more people were aware of the frightening consequences of "loose morals," they would reform. A *Self and Sex* series, consisting of eight volumes and published in the United States between 1900 and 1915, became very popular among Canadian reformers. One volume, entitled *What a Young Man Ought to Know*, contained a sixty-page lecture on the frightful effects of venereal disease. Purity lecturers, notably Beatrice Bridgen, William Lund Clark, and Arthur W. Beall, hired by the W.C.T.U. and the evangelical Churches, toured the

<sup>49</sup> Glen PETRIE, *A Singular Iniquity: The Campaigns of Josephine Butler* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

<sup>50</sup> HALLER and HALLER, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>51</sup> Michael BLISS, "Pure Books on Avoided Subjects: Pre-Freudian Sexual Ideas in Canada," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1970), p. 104.

<sup>52</sup> W.C.T.U., *Annual Reports*.

<sup>53</sup> Methodist Church, Department of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report* (1912-1913), p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> SOCIAL SERVICE CONGRESS, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>55</sup> *Grain Growers' Guide*, 16 Jan. 1918.

country, imparting the secrets of life to the young.<sup>56</sup> The instruction they offered was filled with threats and warnings, encouraged continence and discouraged sexual activity.

Victorian vitalist physiology, which maintained that the body contained a limited amount of energy, strengthened the reformers' contention that sexual activity ought to be discouraged for the sake of the race. The Rev. W. J. Hunter explained that sex depleted the body's working power, shortened human life, and burdened it with infirmities and diseases. He defended sexual abstinence on the grounds that the vigour of the race demanded it. Masturbation or the "solitary evil" also stood condemned since "loss of semen is loss of blood".<sup>57</sup>

The reformers' underlying strategy was to raise the status and influence of good Christian women. The Victorian female was popularly believed to be asexual. Moreover, it was obvious that male promiscuity was primarily to blame for the degree of prostitution. The simplest answer, therefore, was to enlist the asexual females to help impose a higher standard of morality upon men. The double standard which allowed a man to "sow his wild oats" had to be demolished. Dr. Hastings felt it most important to blot out the "physiological fallacy of sexual necessity for men".<sup>58</sup>

The revelation of police compliance in prostitution convinced many reformers that women needed a ballot in order to be effective in altering men's moral standards. Almost every reformer who supported woman suffrage believed that women would help improve the nation's morals. This involved no real change in woman's role or function. It merely meant capitalizing on woman's traditional perceived virtues: her conservatism and her chastity.

Canada's suffragists confirmed the reformers' faith in woman's purity and removed any hesitation they may have had to give women a vote. Almost without exception the women upheld a strict Victorian code of morality. Emily Stowe approved of the "anti-sex" sex education which taught the young "all the consequences of the transgression".<sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, Dr. Amelia Youmans, founder of the Manitoba Equal Suffrage Club in 1894, issued a foreboding pamphlet entitled "Warning Words," which recounted all the dire effects of venereal disease. Lillian Beynon Thomas advised women to wear modest dress in order to curb "animal desire".<sup>60</sup> Alice Chown, a Toronto feminist, wished to limit sex relations to purposes of reproduction.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Beatrice Brigden and William Lund Clark were hired by the Canadian Methodist Church. Arthur W. Beall lectured to the schoolboys of Ontario on behalf of the W.C.T.U. Methodist Church, Board of Evangelical and Social Service, Correspondence between Beatrice Brigden and Dr. Albert Moore; United Church Archives, Beatrice Brigden and William Lund Clark Papers.

<sup>57</sup> HUNTER, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Social Service Congress, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>59</sup> Waterloo Lutheran University Archives, Emily Stowe Papers, *op. cit.*, Scrapbook IV, undated (c. 1877) newspaper clipping.

<sup>60</sup> *Winnipeg Free Press*, 19 Aug. 1916.

<sup>61</sup> Alice A. CHOWN, *The Stairway* (Boston: Cornhill Co., 1921), p. 114.

The campaigns against prostitution and white slavery attracted enthusiastic suffrage support. Dr. Margaret Gordon, President of the Toronto Suffrage Association, called white slavery the strongest reason which made her a suffragist.<sup>62</sup> In 1908, Flora Macdonald Denison, the President of the National Suffrage Association, was even willing to violate cherished civil liberties to end the trade. She wanted the city to be divided into districts each having an officer with the power to go into any home and find out about its inmates.<sup>63</sup> The suffragists tried to protect young girls from the white slave traders by raising the age of consent to twenty-one. Every suffrage society also demanded that proprietors be held responsible for the order and respectability of their houses, an attack aimed directly at the brothel keepers.<sup>64</sup>

The purity problem seems to have been the main issue over which the suffragists displayed sex antagonism, uniting in a sisterhood of sorts against the men. It angered them that the prostitute consistently played the villain while the man got off with a nominal fine.<sup>65</sup> In their opinion the prostitute was less guilty since she often fell through hunger or was driven into sin because "some man" paid her starvation wages.<sup>66</sup> Conversely the client always went through choice. Flora Macdonald Denison bemoaned the fact that "hundreds of our sisters are forced to live lives of shame to keep body and soul together."<sup>67</sup> Lillian Beynon Thomas wished to subject the men to equal mortification by having the names of those found in houses in the red light district published in newspapers.<sup>68</sup>

The unwed mother, considered another victim of male licentiousness, also aroused sympathy. Agnes Chesley, women's editor for the *Montreal Star*, recommended that she be treated with infinite compassion: "If a girl goes astray, the fault must be looked for in her heritage from her parents, her environment and, above all, in her upbringing."<sup>69</sup> Existing parental custody laws made the father the sole legal guardian of legitimate offspring but left the illegitimate child the sole responsibility of its mother. The well-known Manitoba suffragist, Nellie McClung, pointed to the injustice of this situation: "If a child is a treasure in a married happy home and clouds arise and a separation follows, who gets the child? The father! But who gets the illegitimate child that bears the brand of shame? The poor unfortunate mother..."<sup>70</sup> Equal parental rights over legitimate and illegitimate children became a popular cause among the suffragists.

<sup>62</sup> University of Toronto Archives, Flora Macdonald Denison Papers, collection of newspaper clippings, *Star Weekly*, Toronto, 23 March 1913.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, unpub. typescript, "The White Slave Traffic", n.d.

<sup>64</sup> SASKATCHEWAN PROVINCIAL EQUAL FRANCHISE BOARD, *Minutes of Meetings*, 18 Feb. 1916.

<sup>65</sup> *Montreal Herald*, Woman's Edition, 26 Nov. 1913, p. 24.

<sup>66</sup> *B. C. Federationist*, 17 Oct. 1916. A quote from a B. C. suffragist.

<sup>67</sup> *Toronto World*, 15 Jan. 1911.

<sup>68</sup> *Winnipeg Free Press*, 7 Oct. 1916.

<sup>69</sup> *Montreal Herald*, 24 Sept. 1913.

<sup>70</sup> *Grain Growers' Guide*, 26 Feb. 1913.

The move to liberalize divorce laws also aimed at freeing women from sexual exploitation. The suffragists objected most strongly to the clause which allowed a man a divorce on the grounds of adultery but which denied such a right to a woman unless she was forced to cohabit with her husband's mistress.<sup>71</sup> The option of divorce meant a woman no longer had to tolerate her husband's sexual whims, his brutality, or his promiscuity.

According to John and Robin Haller, Victorian feminists used purity reform to try to achieve a kind of sexual freedom.<sup>72</sup> Since contemporary social values would not countenance female promiscuity, the women went the other way and denied their sexuality, in an effort to keep from being considered or treated as sex objects. Their prudery was a mask that conveniently hid the more "radical" effort to achieve freedom of person. Michael Bliss also links the movement for sexual repression to the movement to liberate women — "often, indeed, to liberate them from male sexual tyranny."<sup>73</sup>

Canada's suffragists definitely tried to play down the physical side of relationships. They constantly exhorted women to become friends and companions to men rather than sexual toys or dolls.<sup>74</sup> They seemed to feel that physical strength still played a prominent role in work and in defence and that in order to claim equality women must emphasize the spiritual and the intellectual side of human nature. It could be argued then that they feared sex because it accentuated physical needs and kept the weaker woman in a subservient relationship. As Alice Chown explained, "So long as woman accepts indiscriminate sex relations, so long will she be subject to man."<sup>75</sup> For the same reason the suffragists were unable to assess the value to women of artificial birth control devices which they interpreted simply as one more means of facilitating male licentiousness.<sup>76</sup>

Purity reform was offensive as well as defensive. In a period plagued by revelations of corruption and disease, the claim to represent a higher morality became a very powerful weapon in the suffragists' arsenal. With a ballot in their hands they could bring their moral pressure to bear upon deviant males and become the moral arbiters for the nation. Their strength rested in the respect they gained by presenting themselves as upholders of conventional female virtues.

#### IV

In order to understand the suffragists' social attitudes we have to understand the values of the group with which they identified. As Anglo-

<sup>71</sup> Helen Gregory MACGILL, *Daughters, Wives, and Mothers in British Columbia: Some Laws Regarding Them* (Vancouver, 1913), p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> HALLER and HALLER, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

<sup>73</sup> BLISS, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>74</sup> *Grain Growers' Guide*, 14 Aug. 1912; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 28 Aug. 1915; *Toronto World*, 31 Oct. 1909; *Montreal Herald*, Woman's Edition, 26 Nov. 1913, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> CHOWN, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>76</sup> C. ROVER, *Love, Morals and the Feminists* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

Saxon, Protestant middle class, such women shared the anxieties and expectations of this group. They saw women's problems through glasses tinted with values shaped by this allegiance.

As demonstrated in the first section, the Anglo-Saxon elite in this period were attempting to preserve or regain racial predominance. Two schools advocated different means towards this end. Eugenists concentrated upon applying lessons in animal breeding to humans while a group of environmental reformers argued for the need to improve the living and health standards of the population. Both approaches stressed the importance of woman's role as mother. The suffragists wished to participate in the re-creation of the race and therefore accepted the priority of woman's maternal function. Environmentalists themselves, they found within this theory a justification for their activities in the reform movement. Environmentalism also promised women greater freedom of movement and more diverse activities. Finally, the approval of domestic science training raised the status of homemaker. These factors together satisfied the suffragists' longing for recognition.

The same Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite faced another challenge in the growth of large cities, city slums, and resultant intemperance and social vice. The campaign to reinstate Protestant standards of chastity and sobriety naturally attracted the women since it glorified their particular virtues.

With an understanding of the suffragists' background their social attitudes become predictable. It would have been inconceivable to most of these women to suggest serious restructuring of sex roles or to suggest that women imitate male immorality. Rather, they took advantage of the new dignity bestowed on women to achieve certain victories. The vote and the acquisition of higher education facilities, less restricting garments, and a wider range of physical activities ought to be counted among these.