

## Eugenic Sterilization: The Final Solution for America

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### Abstract

In the 1920's and 1930's, eugenic theory enjoyed popularity in educated America society. Charles Fremont Dight, a physician from Minnesota, led a movement in that state to pass laws and spread education concerning eugenics. He believed the government, church, and educational system insufficiently fought crime and degeneracy; thus, eugenic sterilization laws were the only way to permanently solve society's problems. However, though he dismissed each of these three institutions as inadequate, Dight still used each one to communicate or implement eugenic theory. Dight sought to create a utopian society, free of crime and problems of any kind, accomplished only through sterilizing individuals he and others deemed "unfit."

"If the basement of your house was being flooded from an open water tap, would you keep a person there to bail out the water, or would you close the tap and stop the flow?"<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Charles Dight asked this question of his fellow Minnesotans in the early 1920's. He assumed most people would respond by turning off the tap. It seemed most logical to eliminate the source instead of dealing with the resulting problems. But Dight used this illustration not to speak of literal basements and water taps, but instead to explain his solution to society's problems of crime and degeneracy.

The basement in this illustration represented society, specifically American society. This basement was being flooded not with water, but instead by mentally, physically, and morally inferior people. Dight, as well as other eugenicists, used various terms to label the "defective" portion of the population: moron, feeble-minded, idiot, mentally deficient or defective, and imbecile.<sup>2</sup> With these terms he labeled individuals who deviated mentally, physically, or ethically from what he saw as normal or healthy.

Dight broadened his definition of the "defective" in his preface of a pamphlet entitled *Human Thoroughbreds—Why Not?* In this lengthy essay Dight described the socially unfit people of the United States. According to Dight, these people included "the hopelessly insane, the seriously epileptic, the mentally subnormal and feeble-minded, those lacking altruism or who are strongly inclined to some form

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<sup>1</sup> Charles F. Dight, "Protect at the Danger Point" (Charles Dight Papers, Minneapolis Historical Society, Box 5).

<sup>2</sup> "Report of Committee on Classification of Feeble-minded" (*Journal of Psycho-Asthenics* 15, 1910), as quoted in *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, Steven Noll and James W. Trent, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 87.

of unsocial behavior.” This definition paints a broad picture of people deemed “defective;” everyone from the insane to those lacking altruism flooded the basement of society with their degeneracy. Even worse, this flood showed no signs of slowing; Dight closes his paragraph by stating that those labeled above were “increasing at an alarming rate.”<sup>3</sup>

These “defective” people shared one thing in common, according to Dight. All of their defects, whether physical, mental, or moral, traced back to inherited biology. Problems in society—including crime, violence, welfare abuse, and sexual promiscuity—were caused by one root problem: genetics. Dight wrote in one article that the feebleminded or criminally inclined “inherited their bad mentalities which make them socially unfit.” To make their situation even worse, this inheritance was irreversible. “A good house cannot be made out of rotting lumber,” he often wrote, illustrating the intrinsic worthlessness of people labeled “defective.” They could no more make themselves valuable to society than rotted lumber could be made useful for building.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I seek to outline Charles Dight’s stance concerning eugenics, placing him within the context of his times. First I will examine his diagnosis concerning the cause of social degeneracy, followed by why he viewed the other remedies as ineffective. I will conclude with what he viewed as the result of his final solution: an American utopia. Dight spurned the established institutions of reform, such as education, the church, and the state. However, while he believed these three ineffective, he still employed each of them as vehicles to further his cause. Therefore, he created an argument for a eugenic solution by using three institutions he believed incapable of solving society’s problems.

Charles Dight earned a living as a physician. He was born on the east coast, but moved northwest to teach at the University of Minnesota after teaching at the University of Michigan’s medical school and at the American University in Beirut, Syria. During his time in Minnesota he also worked as Medical Director of the Ministers Life and Casualty Union.<sup>5</sup>

Dight did not advocate eugenics only; he also promoted other causes, such as efficiency in urban sanitation. One of his ideas for improving in this area involved feeding Minneapolis’ garbage to pigs instead of burning it. Dight also enthusiastically embraced socialism, and wrote profusely on the subject, including the essay, “Science and Socialism.” He dedicated his book, *Call for a New Social Order*, to “Workers for Man’s Biologic and Economic Betterment.” His dedication to socialistic ideas is noted further down the page where he wrote that the contents of his book were not copyrighted; instead, “Others May Use Freely Whatever Good This Book Contains.”<sup>6</sup>

However, Dight dedicated himself primarily to his crusade concerning eugenics, a cause he took up in the 1920’s and continually promoted up to his death in 1938. He even encouraged eugenic study post mortem by dedicating his life savings to establishing the Dight Institute for Eugenics on the campus of the University of Minnesota. The name has since been changed to the Dight Institute for the Promotion of Human Genetics.<sup>7</sup>

Dight’s writings are important in studying eugenics in Minnesota not only because of the abundance of his writing—he wrote over 300 letters to Minnesota newspapers—but also because of his leadership

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<sup>3</sup> Charles F. Dight, *Human Thoroughbreds—Why Not?* Minneapolis, 1922.

<sup>4</sup> Charles F. Dight, “Human Betterment and Crime Prevention Through Eugenics” (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. Box 5, folder entitled Eugenics: corresp. and misc., 1925), 3.

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Dight, *Call for A New Social Order* (Argus Publishing Company, Minneapolis, 1936), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dight, *Call for A New Social Order*, 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Historical Society Web site, [http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history\\_topics/117eugenics.html](http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/117eugenics.html)

status in the Minnesota eugenics movement. He founded the Minnesota Eugenics Society, and held the position of President of the Society for many years.

However, though he was an important player in the Minnesota eugenics movement, the case may be made that Dight was also somewhat of an extremist and an eccentric. He built and lived in a tree house in Minneapolis, which soon became a popular tourist attraction. In an introduction to one of Dight's books, an fellow author notes the popularity of the house: "Many people drove long distances to see the house, and perhaps its owner, and it was not unusual for parties under all sorts of excuses to seek admission to the house." Dight more than welcomed these visitors inside, and "never objected to entertaining them for it was rather a pleasure to him, and seldom did they go away without taking with them some of the doctor's compositions expressing his views, which he held on economic, medical, biological, or other subjects."<sup>8</sup> Dight never missed an opportunity to show his dedication to his causes.

Should Charles Dight's rhetoric be taken seriously? Does he truly represent popular eugenic thought in the 1920's and 1930's? One historian argued that Charles Dight not be taken seriously. She wrote, "Despite the loathsome rhetoric of Chares Dight...Minnesota's eugenic sterilization program was characterized more by ordinariness than extremism."<sup>9</sup> However, a historian may learn much from Dight about the eugenics movement not only in Minnesota, but also the entire Midwest. While he was an extremist in some of his practical ideas—he wanted to greatly extend the power of the state concerning Minnesota's sterilization law—at the core, his rhetoric was essentially the same as what was believed by eugenicists across the country: human behavior could be biologically improved by better breeding.

When Dight took up the cause of eugenics just before the 1920's, the movement was enjoying popularity across the country. Eugenic study in America began in the early 1900's and enjoyed greatest influence in America approximately between 1905 and 1930.<sup>10</sup> According to one historian, the greatest numbers of people were sterilized in the late 1930's, during the Depression.<sup>11</sup> There is disagreement among eugenic historians as to what caused the eugenic movement to wane; some argue it was due to the revelation of Hitler's atrocities, while others argue it was the shortage of medical personal due to World War II.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the cause, eugenics began to lose popularity not only among professionals, but also among the general American populace.

But before eugenics fell from favor, many believed in its potential to solve society's most difficult issues. In his study of eugenics, as well as his extensive writings concerning eugenics, Dight essentially sought to solve one great problem: why is there crime and degeneracy in the world? Why an abuse of welfare and the state system? Dight offered his answer in a pamphlet, stating succinctly, "The mountains of evil which exist among us are the output...of bad mentalities or inferior human stock."<sup>13</sup> In another essay he echoed this thinking, explaining "Crime is frequent among us because fully four per cent of our entire people are in some way very badly at fault in their mentalities."<sup>14</sup> In these quotes Dight connected a mental or physical condition with a tendency toward crime, and in doing so he argued that the problem with society was entirely caused by biological means. Everything that is morally corrupt in society can be traced back

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<sup>8</sup> Dight, *Call for A New Social Order*, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Ladd-Taylor, "The 'Sociological Advantages' of Sterilization: Fiscal Policies and Feeble-Minded Women in Interwar Minnesota," as quoted in *Mental Retardation in America*, 282.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth M. Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ladd-Taylor, 282.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Charles F. Dight, *Human Thoroughbreds*, v.

<sup>14</sup> Dight, "Human Betterment," 3.

to bad genes in criminals due to bad genes in parents. Though other factors, such as environment, played a small part in a person's actions, genes were the ultimate reason people behaved the way they did, for good or ill.

A definition of the term "eugenics" is essential, as the previously mentioned ideas (degeneracy tightly linked with biological makeup) are the building blocks of eugenic theory. Dight himself defined eugenics as "the science of improving man by good breeding."<sup>15</sup> Sir Francis Galton, the man credited as the founder of eugenics and who coined the term, defined it as "the science which deals with all the influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage."<sup>16</sup> Both of these definitions involve the connection of predetermined genetics with physical actions.

Essentially, eugenics was a biological cure for what was perceived as a biological problem. Dight compared practical eugenics with breeding out undesirable characteristics in animals and plants, preventing trees that bear bad fruit from seeding, "weeding the human garden," or "breeding a better herd..."<sup>17</sup> In another pamphlet, Dight argued there should be as much attention given to human breeding as to the breeding of good hogs and dogs, an idea echoed consistently throughout Dight's writings.<sup>18</sup> He frequently closed his letters to editors of local papers with variations of the phrase; "It would be to the credit of American intelligence if we took as much care to improve our people biologically as we take to improve barn-yard stock."<sup>19</sup>

Later in this pamphlet, Dight outlined not only the definition of eugenics, but also its purpose. He wrote that eugenic law sought "permanent race betterment especially in man's mentality, to be secured by transmission of hereditary traits that are fundamental to good citizenship, such as health, sanity, energy, and well-balanced mentality."<sup>20</sup> This purpose of "permanent race betterment" corresponds well with his definition. He defined eugenics as a way to "improve man by good breeding," and the purpose included total "race betterment."

However, while up to this point Dight seemed to focus on encouraging the transmission of positive traits, he actually wrote much more extensively about restricting the transmission of "bad" traits. This he sought to accomplish through sterilization of those deemed "unfit." Since society's problems began in the blood—according to Dight and other leading eugenicists—that is where they must be solved. Dight also suggested, "feeble-mindedness is caused by a defective brain and is incurable."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while encouraging "fit" individuals to procreate, Dight believed more attention must be given to keep defective people from procreating and thereby producing hundreds of thousands of degenerates for the next generation. According to Dight, eugenic law encouraging sterilization could single-handedly save society from its downhill slide into degeneracy.

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<sup>15</sup> Dight, "Human Betterment," 1.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra M. Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Charles F. Dight, "Who Shall Decide Who Shall Be Sterilized: Who May Have Or Not Have Children" (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. Box 5, folder entitled Eugenics: corresp. and misc., 1925), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Dight, *Human Thoroughbreds*, iii.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to the Editor (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>20</sup> Dight, "Human Betterment," 1.

<sup>21</sup> C.F. Dight, "For and Against the Eugenic Sterilization Bill" (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society), 1.

Thus what has been examined so far can be summarized in a series of questions and answers, a system Dight frequently used in his essays and letters. If asked the question, "Why is there crime?" Dight may answer, "Biological makeup of criminals predisposes them to be evil." If asked a follow up question, "How then can crime be prevented?" Dight would respond, "We prevent crime by preventing criminals and degenerates from reproducing."

However, not everyone agreed with Dight's conclusion. Some institutions believed people could be reformed through means such as punishment, personal growth, or learning. These institutions included the state, the church, and the educational system. Dr. Dight agreed, at least marginally, with what each of these institutions offered; certainly the level of education and degree of opportunity, as well as family background, contributed to who a child would become.

But according to Dight, these organizations offered only topical ointments; they merely treated the symptoms, and did not attack the source of the disease. Dight found each institution ineffective for various reasons. In an article written around 1925, Dight described their shortcomings: "Until now we have looked almost entirely to religion, education, and forms of punishment to hold in check or to reform weak and bad characteristics. And with what results? Those measures do not change human nature nor do away with inborn defects nor prevent their hereditary transmission."<sup>22</sup> In this statement, he specifically addressed three agents of reform in America: religion, education, and the state. Dight explained that even these three, with all their wealth, power, and influence, could not effectively produce change in American society, or more specifically, within the state of Minnesota. The problem lay beyond the realm of external interference.

Dight again expressed his doubts in these institutions by writing, "The wisest and best people of America are doubting if old methods of reform will meet our needs."<sup>23</sup> Clearly Dight counted himself among the "wisest and best people of America," in that he certainly doubted the ability of the church, state, and educational system to change individuals from the outside in.

He expressed his doubt, even contempt, for these three institutions in another essay, where he explained that the feeble-minded lacked the mental and moral capacity for change, and therefore, "the three great agents of reform, religion, schools, and courts of law have largely failed to reform them or rid the world of their kind and the crime and evil they bring into it."<sup>24</sup> Schools, churches, juvenile courts, prisons, and similar institutions that sought to evoke change in people for moral and societal reasons worked in vain. Dight believed some people possessed genetics that predisposed them, physically and mentally, to a life of crime and degeneracy.

Dight believed, as he wrote in an essay, "people were born with different grades of possible attainment for good or evil ranging from the idiot to the genius."<sup>25</sup> Put succinctly, there are some who are born criminals, and thus cannot be reformed by an existing institution. They lack the capacity for goodness. In contrast, Dight believed some people were so "strong and well-balanced mentally that they do not commit crime under conditions most provocative to it."<sup>26</sup> Thus Dight believed that bad people cannot help being bad, and good people cannot help being good.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>24</sup> Dight, "Human Betterment," 4.

<sup>25</sup> Charles F. Dight, "Delinquency and Crime Commission: Questions We Should Ask Ourselves" (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Dight specifically attacked the church, which he referred to as the “uplifter reformer,”<sup>27</sup> for its futile efforts. He wrote in an essay that “the codling and forgiving treatment of the other class” did not produce effective results. He continued by explaining that the church “could never make a bad brain a good one, and cannot change human biology...”<sup>28</sup> Dight also called up centuries of church efforts as yielding little to no results in permanently changing society for the better.<sup>29</sup>

In one essay, Dight responded to an argument made by an individual on behalf of moral and religious training. Dight summed up his opponents argument: “Some people tell us that the best way to prevent crime is by moral training of the youth.”<sup>30</sup> This came from the stance of an ethical, not a biological, argument. It was the argument of the church, an argument that took into account human nature, the concept of sin, and the options available through free will. The church viewed people as in need of reform, a reformation brought about through a lifestyle change and spiritual renewal. People in society needed to be taught how to live as Christians and thus make healthy moral choices. The church largely objected to eugenics because Christians believed education involving moral and religious training effectively fought criminal propensities.

Dight disagreed. He acknowledged that people who think this way are “right at heart,” but they “overlook the fact that training after birth cannot undo a bad inheritance.” He argued, “many people in the line of unfit family strains are born with but little ability to respond effectively to moral training.”<sup>31</sup> Attempt to train them morally if you want, he seemed to say, but you cannot fight nature. Dight believed some people possessed learning disabilities when it came to choosing right from wrong; the church was fighting against genetics.

Dight expressed doubts concerning the effectiveness of the church in his essay, “Human Betterment and Crime Prevention Through Eugenics.” He wrote, “Very few people with inborn mental defect can be reformed—re-formed—and made right and well behaved.”<sup>32</sup> Dight was explaining that religion could not change those deemed “defective” because their defects ran in their blood; they were entirely biological and hereditary. The church could no more reform the morally inferior than it could make a short man tall or a blind man see.

He later quoted a Rev. Dr. Drummond as stating, “The Christian, like the poet, is born, not made.”<sup>33</sup> By publishing this radical statement, Dight supported the idea that even salvation is predisposed in the blood, backing up the point that you are either born moral or immoral.

In one letter given to a friend (perhaps a religious leader), Dight went a few steps further than simply criticizing the church, and explicitly attacked the Bible. He wrote that man could see the truths of God more easily in nature than through any other means, including Scripture. He wrote, “From [nature’s] truths His character is revealed with more certainty, not doubt, than from any man written book at a time when men were ignorant of nature’s facts as we know them.”<sup>34</sup> This “man written book” is a direct reference to the Bible. This furthered Dight’s dismissal of the church and its methods; how could the

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<sup>27</sup> Dight, “Human Betterment”, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Dight, “Human Betterment,” 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>33</sup> Dight, *Human Thoroughbreds*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Letter written to Dr. G.G. Eitel, Minneapolis (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Box 7).

church be an effective reformer when it based its ideas and methods on a book written at a time when “men were ignorant of nature’s facts as we know them?”<sup>35</sup>

Later in this letter, he explained, “the interpretations of scripture by men are so conflicting and different as to be impossible as a spiritual guide or as an aid to a knowledge of God.”<sup>36</sup> But then Dight crossed the line from criticizing the church’s efforts to gently instructing them. He wrote that while Scripture is impossible to understand, facts and truths in nature were “beneficial and orderly.” The way to know God was not through Scripture, but through the observation of nature and its laws, including the “laws” of eugenics.<sup>37</sup>

Dight did not limit his criticisms to the church and its efforts; he attacked the educational system as well. In a section of one of his pamphlets, he sought to answer “Five Great Questions” concerning the improvement of society and the building of a superior race through eugenics. The third question asked, “Will education aid much in this improvement [of society]?” Dight firmly responded, “No, it must come by breeding to brains...the brain which a child inherits determines its mental capacity.”<sup>38</sup> When asked further on in the essay if “good sanitary conditions” and a “good environment” could change a person permanently, he responded that those changes, often attempted by the educational system, provided only temporary results. Nurture was not the issue; the problem was within the nature of a person.

Dight’s main argument with education involved what he saw as only temporary results. In a section of the pamphlet entitled, “Former False Views Abandoned,” Dight argued that since the effects of education and environment could not be passed on by heredity to a couple’s children, these effects remained within one generation. However, eugenic breeding, according to Dight, would create lasting and continual breeds of good characteristics, which would be naturally passed through hereditary traits.<sup>39</sup>

Dight also criticized the educational system in letters to editors. He frequently submitted letters to newspapers in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and many other cities in Minnesota. In one letter he corrected another writer whose opinion was revealed in his own letter published in the *Minneapolis Tribune*. This unknown author wrote, “We’d have half as many fools if there were twice as many schools.”<sup>40</sup> In his letter Dight pithily corrected the man, “It would be nearer the truth to say that if we have twice as many schools we’d have just as many fools.”<sup>41</sup> Dight did not believe the educational system could solve a genetic problem of idiocy.

Dight continued his response by taking a step backward. He acknowledged that education could bring out “inborn potential capacity.” But, he argued, the brain of the moron lacks that inborn potential capacity, and thus, “education cannot bring out something from where there is nothing.”<sup>42</sup> He continued by explaining to his readers that these people (who do not possess inborn potential capacity) will only ever do the simplest kind of work, and all efforts to educate them beyond the most basic level would be fruitless.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Dight, *Human Thoroughbreds*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>40</sup> C.F. Dight, Letter to the Editor of the Tribune, 11/22 (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Box 7).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Not only did Dight question the ability of the church and educational system, but he also condemned the efforts of the state thus far. As stated in an earlier quote, Dight believed that “very few people with inborn defects could be reformed.” He then continued, “The whipping post method of one class of reformers will not do it...”<sup>44</sup> This is an explicit reference to the state and its inability to solve the problem of crime.

Dight also wrote that the courts of law, “good and necessary as they are, have failed to reform [the feeble-minded] or rid the world of them and the crime and evil they bring into it.”<sup>45</sup> Punishment issued by the state fell short of creating lasting or permanent change in criminals.

In one essay specifically addressing crime, Dight stated that if America seriously wanted to fight crime, her citizens should keep two facts in mind. The first fact was that man possessed certain faculties such as conscience, reason, and kindness, and possessed each in certain degrees. These degrees are predetermined by birth, which tied directly into the second fact that Dight mentioned: the environment serves as a catalyst to bring out what is already there. He reminds his readers “there are more real criminals in society than those who commit crime, for many persons remain honest solely because they have not been subject to temptation.”<sup>46</sup> From this point Dight makes his case for the sterilization of the “criminally inclined.”

The state could not fix the problem economically either, but instead bore the brunt of the problem financially. Dight painted a vivid scene of hopelessness in his series of radio talks in the early 1930’s. Here Dight described himself as a “long range optimist...but a short range pessimist, in that it seems we shall have to be worse for a short time before we’re better.”<sup>47</sup> He continued by giving his listeners a list of statistics describing the current situation in America, beginning with the crime rate, moving on to kidnappings, then to burglarizing of homes, then to the amount of Americans making their living through crime, a number which, he estimated, cost the American people more than twelve billion dollars annually.<sup>48</sup>

Just after listing all these crime-related numbers, he continued, “A further fact to think of is that physical and mental deterioration is taking place among the unemployed millions of our people...” These people were “in the feeble-minded, insane, epileptic, and criminal classes.”<sup>49</sup> It would seem Dight suggested not only are these people costing the state and taxpayers billions of dollars each year, but they were also perpetuating the problem by creating more people to be criminals and wards of the state. The unemployed were deteriorating mentally, as well as creating more feeble-minded, insane, and criminal populations.

Then, in the next paragraph, he revealed the need for eugenic sterilization to solve this problem: “These facts and others indicate the great need of social betterment. One means of securing it, aside from economic reconstruction, is to prevent reproduction of the socially unfit classes...”<sup>50</sup> He argued for eugenic law by showing the economic cost to the state and the people, and also by explaining that no matter how much money the state threw at the problem, it would not be solved financially. The answer instead involved a short, relatively inexpensive surgery that restricted the procreation of the socially unfit classes.

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<sup>44</sup> Dight, “Human Betterment,” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Freemont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>46</sup> Dight, “Delinquency and Crime,” 2.

<sup>47</sup> Dight, *Call For a New Social Order*, 75-76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 76

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Though Dight heavily criticized the church, education system, and state for their lack of results, he still used their language and established systems to support his ideas. Thus he created an argument for sterilization using the three organizations he saw as falling short. He used the Bible to show that Jesus supported eugenics, and he borrowed the educational system to gain audience for his views. The state, however, was the tool Dight used most rigorously. He sought to create statewide laws in Minnesota that would provide his ideas with a system of power to enforce them.

Though he doubted the ability of the church to reform the feebleminded and criminal classes, Dight did not shy away from using religious metaphors and Scripture passages to further his message. In an essay he wrote in the mid-1920s, he acknowledged that some believed it was God's will to have feeble-minded people in the world. To those dissenters he asked, "Did not Christ teach eugenics in the parable of the tares growing with the wheat? And which an enemy had sown? Christ said, 'wait until the harvest, then gather ye the good seed into my barns, but gather ye the tares into bundles for burning.'"<sup>51</sup> This story of tares and wheat comes from Matthew 13:24-29. In this parable Jesus described a situation in which a man sowed good seed in his field, but while he slept, an enemy came and sowed tares, or weeds, among the good wheat. The owner of the field commanded his workers to allow the weeds to grow along with the wheat, but then at the harvest to separate the good grain from the tares.

After mentioning this parable in the quote above, Dight gave his interpretation of this story, which involved labeling the symbols, such as the tares and the wheat. He wrote, "In other words, Christ said see that the tares—the mental defectives—shall not reproduce. In each generation eliminate those which appear and soon all people will be good seed only, worthy sons and daughters of the Almighty."<sup>52</sup> In this interpretation Dight blended the spiritual and the physical. He identifies the "tares" or weeds as the mentally defective people in society. In this way he represented Jesus as an enthusiastic supporter of eugenics. But in the following sentence, Dight returns to the spiritual, comparing the good seed with those who are "worthy sons and daughters of the Almighty."<sup>53</sup> Suddenly the spiritual and physical are interchangeable; those with "bad genes" are also the unsaved, while those who are healthy eugenically enjoy the salvation of the Almighty.

Just after this parable and accompanying interpretation, Dight scribbled on his typed transcript an added Scripture: "And every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire."<sup>54</sup> Here too he borrowed the terms of Christ to change Jesus into a eugenic supporter of sterilization. Through these two brief examples, we see that while Dight dismissed the church as ineffective in producing lasting change, he certainly did not hesitate to use snippets from the Scriptures to give authority to his theories.

Dight also quoted clergy who supported eugenic measures. At the close of an essay, Dight quoted Dr. H.E. Fosdick, a popular preacher at this time. Fosdick enthusiastically endorsed eugenics by stating that failure to use eugenic measures "is almost certainly going to put us in the position of endeavoring to cure the symptoms while the basic causes of social degeneration and disorder go untouched!"<sup>55</sup> In this one statement the clergyman not only promoted eugenic law as effective, but he also acknowledged the ineffectiveness of the church.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dight, "Who Shall Decide Who Shall Be Sterilized," 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Dight probably quoted this clergyman in particular because Fosdick was a leader in the anti-fundamentalism movement at the time, and the pastor of a very large congregation in New York City. He was labeled “the most eloquent voice in the American pulpit during the 1920’s and 1930’s.”<sup>57</sup> He enjoyed popularity for his ability to deal directly with the “personal problems” of his listeners, with significant rhetorical skill.<sup>58</sup> Fosdick wrote extensively on various Christian issues, and was also an enthusiastic supporter of eugenics. By quoting a Christian leader of that time, Dight sought to enlist support of the Christian population.

As with the church, Dight also used education as a means to promote his message. As a medical professor with experience teaching at four universities, Dight was instrumental in seeing that the colleges taught freshmen-level classes in eugenics. He proudly states in an essay authored in the 1920’s that 52 universities across the United States taught eugenics as a special subject, while over 65 schools taught it alongside another subject.<sup>59</sup>

Dight greatly admired the state of California for its accomplishments in sterilizations among its own citizens. In 1926, Dr. Dight received a letter from the Sonoma State Home, an institution for the feebleminded and mentally defective in California. The author of the letter, a medical superintendent, seemed to be answering a request for advice by Dight regarding how California was able to accomplish so much regarding numbers of defectives sterilized. The superintendent wrote that it was not hard to obtain permission from guardians and relatives in the past few years. The key, according to this man, was education. He wrote, “It simply has been a matter of educating the public here in California on the question of sterilization.”<sup>60</sup> He continues by explaining how medical professionals in California accomplished that education. One way they reached the public was through public organizations. The superintendent wrote, “Every opportunity we have in addressing public organizations we mention it if we have an opportunity at all and everybody interested talks sterilization.”<sup>61</sup>

This widened the realm of education from universities to the broader public. When addressing audiences of regular citizens, Dight used various means to get his message across, including catchy slogans such as “Sterilization: the Ounce of Prevention makes Unnecessary the Pound of Cure.” Or, referring to the illustration that opened this paper, he wrote: “Prevent their Reproduction! Close the Open Tap!”<sup>62</sup>

California was not the only object of Dight’s admiration: he also begged advice of Germany, specifically Adolph Hitler, concerning eugenic sterilization. He wrote a couple letters directly to Hitler himself, and received postcards back from the German leader. Dight also discussed Germany’s eugenic implementation in his letters to editors. In a letter to the editor of *The Star*, Dight praised Germany for adopting means greater than any other nation to “improve the quality of its people by sterilizing the mentally and morally defective to prevent their reproduction.” He cited 150,000 sterilizations accomplished by Hitler up to July 1935. Dight also chided his fellow Americans for lagging so far behind a European country in this regard.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, *The Oxford Companion to American History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1966), 306.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 306.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Sonoma State Home in Eldridge, California (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>62</sup> C.F. Dight, “Protect at the Danger Point” (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>63</sup> C.F. Dight, Letter to the Editor of the Star (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minneapolis Historical Society, Box 7).

This admiration Dight had for the German nation leads directly into his most powerful tool for employing eugenic law: the state. Even though Dight did not think the state had been effective up to this point, he employed governmental measures as his main vehicle for producing change. He actively involved himself in promoting his case legally by constantly writing Minnesota congressmen, as well as congressmen of other states, such as Kansas and California.

A memorandum from a Senator whose name was difficult to decipher (apparently a G. Swenson, or a similar name) made plain Dr. Dight's enthusiasm and persistence in contacting congressman. The memo states: "One Senator told me the other day that if you would stay away and not bother them about the bill it would have a better chance to pass."<sup>64</sup> Dight apparently persistently promoted his ideas to the point of annoyance. While this may have earned him unfavorable reputation with the congressman, he still seemed to be a respected leader in the Minnesota eugenics movement.

Dight kept in contact with governmental leaders as well as health professionals in several states, such as the aforementioned Kansas and California. These two states were important to Dight because they led the nation in number of feeble-minded sterilized, and had passed laws regarding coerced sterilization several years earlier. Seventeen states in America had legalized eugenic-based sterilization by the mid 1920's, most of them in the Midwest (such as North Dakota, Iowa, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) or the West (such as Oregon, Nevada, California, and Montana), though a few states on the east coast passed laws as well. No southern states at this point had passed a eugenic sterilization law.

In 1925, Minnesota passed its own sterilization law. The news elated Dight; however, the law had too many limitations. He immediately began campaigning for bills which gave more power to the state in determining who could be sterilized. The law that passed only gave the state authority over the feeble-minded held in state institutions; Dight wanted broader power. He wrote letters and essays encouraging state officials and the common people to join his cause. In one essay Dight explained why the present law was "wholly inadequate," yet gives praise for the law being the "first meager step" in the right direction.<sup>65</sup> He also brings forward the case of California, urging Minnesota to follow in the footsteps of the state that had sterilized over 5000 of its "state wards and defective people."<sup>66</sup> In contrast, nearly two decades later in 1946, Minnesota had "only" sterilized approximately 1800 of its feeble-minded citizens.<sup>67</sup>

In one article Dight specifically addressed the need for additional bills. The article "For and Against the Eugenics Sterilization Bill," contained quite a few reasons "For" and almost none "Against." Dight reviewed many of the reasons previously mentioned, such as the incurable nature of feeble-mindedness and criminality. He used several word pictures in this article, comparing the current attempts at societal reform with "keeping an ambulance at the foot of a cliff to carry off to the hospital the people who fall over."<sup>68</sup> The thing needed, Dight argued, was a railing, and the bill proposed provided that railing. He wrote that the bill would prevent "much crime, delinquency, and dependency."<sup>69</sup> He also addressed the

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. Box 5, folder entitled Eugenics: misc., undated (ca. 1920's?).

<sup>65</sup> C.F. Dight, "Relating to the Eugenic Sterilization Bill Before the Minnesota Legislature" (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Box 5).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ladd-Taylor 282.

<sup>68</sup> C.F. Dight, "For and Against the Eugenic Sterilization Bill" (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

earlier mentioned aspect of economical advantage, quoting again the cost of crime for the taxpayers, and emphasizing, “the bill was in the interests of the economy.”<sup>70</sup>

Dight spent the first 14 points of his article explaining reasons which favor the passing of the bill. Then, at number 15, Dight addressed the other side. He began this point saying, “AGAINST THIS EUGENIC BILL there is no scientific argument or evidence known to us.” The following paragraph simply expounds on that opening sentence, ending with, “This Bill Is In The Interests Of Economy And Of Race Betterment.”<sup>71</sup>

Through using the church’s language, the system of education, and especially the structure of the state and governmental laws, Dight promoted an ideology of race betterment. But behind each of these essays, speeches, and letters hovered the promise of a coming utopia, ushered in by perfect implementation of eugenic law.

The idea of a future utopia of civilization is a theme throughout many of Dight’s writings. In at least two essays, Dight gave almost identical descriptions of the coming perfect society. He wrote: “Now, to make a better world we must have more better men and women, better biologically, in their innate nature, for that alone gives enduring worth...”<sup>72</sup> This introduction to a coming utopia declares a resounding theme made obvious throughout the last several pages; the key to a perfect society is biology, genetics, and eugenics.

Eugenics would not simply make a better world; it would create a perfect world, free of every form of evil. Following the quote mentioned in the above paragraph, Dight continued by describing several aspects of this new civilization, begun through creating “better men and women” in their “innate nature:”

That people which fosters its superior and eliminates its inferiors will, by the sheer force of its mental and moral qualities lead and dominate the world...such a race will create an almost new civilization and crime, I predict, will vanish, men and women will observe the Golden rule from choice, a high type of religion will conquer the globe, education will expand and, as a catholic father has said, “Science will dazzle the world with its glittering sheen.”<sup>73</sup>

In this brief paragraph Dight examined several aspects of his coming utopia. One of these aspects is world leadership or domination. These people, this new civilization, would be capable of leading the world through their perfection.

This perfection concerned not only “mental and moral qualities,” but also the elimination of crime completely. After the hereditary traits of criminality became extinct through “weeding the human garden,” those who possessed no inclination for crime would be the only humans left in American society.

Dight believed that the elimination of crime would lead the world to a higher form of religion, as well as an expansion of the educational system. In this brief paragraph Dight covered the three institutions he criticized and utilized, organizations that formed a type of theme for this paper: the church, the educational system, and the state.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>71</sup> Charles F. Dight, “For and Against the Eugenics Sterilization Bill” (Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

<sup>72</sup> Dight, “Human Betterment,” 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Other historians have discussed this idea of a utopia within a very different framework. In his book, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*, historian Eric Weitz examined four genocides within the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These occurred in Germany, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Cambodia. One continual theme he discussed in examining each of these acts of genocide is the idea of a utopia. Stalin, Hitler, Milosevic, and the Khmer Rouge all promised their citizens a perfect society at the cost of certain people groups.<sup>74</sup> For some of these dictators the struggle involved issues of ethnicity and race, while other focused on religion, political preference, mental ability, or perceived economic status.

Dight echoed these dictators' ideals when he spoke of the need to "foster [a country's] superiors and eliminate its inferiors."<sup>75</sup> Previously I mentioned that Dight admired Hitler's accomplishments concerning sterilization in Germany. Referring to this paper's opening illustration, Hitler agreed in his rhetoric that the tap must be closed; though he focused primarily on race in his justification for the Holocaust, the basic reasoning behind Hitler's actions run along very similar lines to Charles Dight's ideals. His foundation was built on eugenic theory.

Weitz argued for a comparison of the Holocaust with other events, stating "If we insist on the incomparability of the Holocaust, we place it outside of history."<sup>76</sup> Though Weitz argued specifically for the need to compare the Holocaust with other instances of genocide, it is also important to note that the ideas behind the Holocaust should be comparable as well, not just the results.

Charles Dight urged his fellow Minnesotans to "close the tap and stop the flow" of the feebleminded into the basement of society. He argued that the church, the state, and the educational system only produced temporary change, and therefore fought a battle against crime and degeneracy that they never would win. The only effective and permanent solution was eugenic sterilization law, a solution that Dight communicated and helped implement using the three institutions he dismissed as ineffective. Through these sterilization laws, Dight sought to establish what Hitler, Stalin, and other dictators promised their people: a utopian society, free of sin, degradation, and abuse. Eugenic sterilization was, in Dight's mind, the final solution for America.

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<sup>74</sup> Weitz, Eric, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.)

<sup>75</sup> Dight, "Human Betterment," 4.

<sup>76</sup> Weitz, 12.

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