



THE PROVINCES

TOM FLANAGAN ^{GM}
IN ALBERTA ^{June 17 99}

Eugenics goes to the movies

Heat of the Sun is a new Alberta movie directed by Francis Damberger, who otherwise makes a living directing TV sitcoms. Artistic evaluation is best left to the film critics, but I found the movie beautifully filmed and emotionally compelling. Intellectually, however, it presents a grossly distorted version of history.

Based on the play *Jennie's Story* by feminist playwright Betty Lambert (1933-1983, R.I.P.), *Heart of the Sun* portrays a young woman married to an Alberta farmer in the late 1930s. Jennie wants more than anything else to have a baby. She gradually uncovers the reason why she can't get pregnant: She has been sterilized without her knowledge under Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act, passed in 1928.

The villain of the piece is the local Catholic priest, who took advantage of the teenaged Jennie when she worked for him as a housekeeper one long and snowy winter. Presumably to prevent embarrassing pregnancies (the movie is a little vague on this point), Father Ed had Jennie committed to a mental institution, and talked her mother into approving the sterilization, which Jennie thought was an appendectomy.

Father Ed is not just an individual villain. The movie goes to considerable lengths to associate the Catholic Church with sterilization. The camera lingers on the grillwork in the mental hospital, which looks very much like the screen in Father Ed's confessional. And when Jennie appears before the Eugenics Board, which makes the legal decision to have her sterilized, the female member of the board is depicted as a Catholic nun wearing an old-fashioned flowing white habit.

Linking the Catholic Church with eugenics is grotesque because the Church was the one major social organization in Alberta to offer public opposition to the Sexual Sterilization Act. The proponents of sterilization came from the mainline Protestant churches, particularly the Anglican and United Churches. It is no accident that legislation of this type was passed only in Alberta and British Columbia, the two provinces where the Catholic percentage of the population was smallest in the 1920s.

The movie's treatment of the Catholic Church is a sad reminder that anti-Catholic bias is the only prejudice that it is still fashionable to express. But more than Catholic-bashing is involved. In the original play (less clearly in the movie), the Catholic Church, as the most masculine of organizations, represents patriarchy in general. Jennie says to her husband: "All the men I ever knew made me swear. 'Take care a yer ma. Take care a Ben. Take care a th' farm, don't lose the farm. Be a good girl!'" Father Ed completes this patriarchal domination by making her swear never to tell about their affair and her operation.

Jennie's Story was written in 1981, when feminism was still fresh and patriarchy, like Marx's bourgeoisie, was being used as an all-purpose explanation for everything. It is not surprising that Betty Lambert used patriarchy to make sense of Alberta's eugenics legislation. The historical truth, however, is the opposite of what her play and the movie would have us believe.

The most energetic proponent of the Sexual Sterilization Act was Edmonton police magistrate and feminist leader Emily Murphy. She was joined by the other members of the "Famous Five" — Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, Nellie McClung and Henrietta Muir Edwards — the women who took the Persons Case through the courts, ultimately leading to the appointment of women to the Senate. Collectively, the biggest force pushing for sterilization was the United Farm Women of Alberta, who used their influence with the United Farmers' provincial government to get the legislation passed.

Sterilization was a woman's issue in the 1920s. The ideology of eugenics played some role, but practical considerations were more important. Proponents of sterilization thought it would relieve the pressure on overcrowded institutions by allowing the mentally handicapped to return to their families. Abortion was strictly illegal and birth control virtually so. Mothers — and it was almost always mothers — who had the main responsibility for looking after physically mature but mentally handicapped children were desperate to prevent their sexuality from producing pregnancies. Sterilization was the answer offered by the scientific experts of the day.

Confident of their good intentions and trusting in scientific authority, the progressive feminists of the 1920s succeeded in getting the politicians to pass the legislation. Seventy-five years later, opinion about sterilization of the mentally handicapped has shifted, and Alberta's taxpayers are faced with lawsuits and large claims for compensation. Instead of pinning the blame on the one institution that was blameless, contemporary progressives would do well to study history more carefully. If they did so, they might learn about the risks involved in abandoning traditional conceptions of right and wrong in favour of untested moral innovations.

♦ ♦ ♦

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary.