God & White Men at Yale (May/June 2012)

God and White Men at Yale
In the 1920s, leading thinkers—including the greatest economist America ever produced—focused their efforts on eugenics, preserving the Nordic stock, and the problem of "race suicide."
May/June 2012
by Richard Conniff '73

Richard Conniff '73, a National Magazine Award winner, is the author, most recently, of *The Species Seekers: Heroes, Fools, and the Mad Pursuit of Life on Earth.*

On a sweltering Friday in June 1921, a 54-year-old Yale economics professor named Irving Fisher delivered a major speech at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island. The pain of the recent war in Europe was still fresh, and Fisher was troubled by the quality of those who had died, and the damage to "the potential fatherhood of the race" by the loss of so many young men "medically selected for fighting but thereby prevented from breeding."

In light of these losses, the issue, it seemed to Fisher, was that graduates of leading universities were failing to do their reproductive duty: the families "of American men of science" averaged just 2.22 children, versus a national average of 4.66. (Or as he put it, perhaps too lucidly, "The average Harvard graduate is the father of three-fourths of a son and the average Vassar graduate the mother of one-half of a daughter.") This "race suicide" among "the well-to-do classes means that their places will speedily be taken by the unintelligent, uneducated, and inefficient."

To prevent that, immigration from certain regions needed to be sharply curtailed, and birth control "extended from the white race to the colored" and to other "undesirable" ethnic and economic groups, ideally under the control of a eugenics committee established to "breed out the unfit and breed

in the fit." Otherwise, "the Nordic race … will vanish or lose its dominance."

It was strong stuff, and from a seemingly impeccable source. Irving Fisher '88, '91PhD, a dapper, balding figure, with a white van dyke beard and rimless eyeglasses, was one of America's best-known scholars. The *New York Times* ran long, flattering profiles about his work, and for years the *Wall Street Journal* published "Fisher's Weekly Index," for tracking market prices. The rich and powerful, including congressmen and presidents, sought his advice.

And with good reason: even today, Fisher is widely regarded as the greatest economist America has produced. He devised many of the basic concepts for analyzing the modern financial system and explained them so clearly that, at his death in 1947, the Harvard economics faculty en masse would sign a letter saying, "No American has contributed more to the advancement of his chosen subject."

But Fisher was also a leading voice of the eugenics movement, which aimed to improve human populations through carefully controlled breeding. The aim, more precisely, was to build up the white northern European population, and discourage all others. This agenda, as it found its way into state laws, would mean evicting other Americans from their homes, depriving them of the ability to have children, and locking them away in institutions.

Fisher didn't merely lend his reputation to bigotry. He made eugenics a major focus of his life and regarded it as a natural outgrowth of his economics: "national vitality" depended on a productive citizenry, and it was clear to him that healthy living and careful breeding were the best ways to make the citizenry become more productive. To that end, he helped found the Race Betterment Society; was an active member of the Eugenics Research Association, a group of scholars in the field; and served as founding president of the American Eugenics Society, which organized research, lobbying, and propaganda for the movement.

Yale figured prominently in this work. The early meetings of the AES took place in the Manhattan home of an influential friend of Fisher's from his college years, Madison Grant, Class of 1887. Other university administrators, faculty, and alumni also played an active part, among them the conservationist Gifford Pinchot '89 and the explorer and geography professor Ellsworth Huntington '09PhD. The AES later established its headquarters in offices overlooking the New Haven Green, at Elm and Church Streets. In the years leading up to World War II, when it was carefully downplaying the anti-Semitic character of the eugenics program in Nazi Germany, the AES was housed on the Yale campus. The seminal text of the movement was Madison Grant's 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race,* which influenced Adolf Hitler himself.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, eugenics "fell squarely in the mainstream of scientific and popular culture," according to Yale history professor Daniel Kevles, author of the 1985 book *In the Name of Eugenics.* Theodore Roosevelt popularized the term "race suicide," for what he saw as the dwindling of the old Anglo-American stock, and the young Winston Churchill advocated sterilization and labor camps for "mental defectives." Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger decried the proliferation of "human weeds," while progressive reformer Havelock Ellis thought that getting the reproductive choices right would require the sexual liberation of women.

Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, had coined the word "eugenics" in 1883 from the Greek for "of good birth." But it really gained currency after 1900, with the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's work describing how different traits are inherited in pea plants—and particularly after researchers demonstrated in 1907 that Mendelian inheritance plays a role in eye color in humans, too.

Eugenicists inferred—incorrectly, as we now know—that single genes, or "unit characters," could determine

feeblemindedness, insanity, alcoholism, and even broad swaths of behavior like criminality. They also believed that society could now use this knowledge to dramatically improve the species. Huntington, the Yale geographer, described this as the fifth “most momentous” discovery in human history, after tools, speech, fire, and writing. For Fisher, likewise, it was the coming of an epoch: “We could make a new human in a hundred years.”

By the late 1920s, 376 American colleges were offering courses in eugenics. The army of enthusiasts included, at various times, the presidents of Yale, Harvard, Stanford, the American Museum of Natural History, and the universities of Michigan, Wisconsin, and California. State fairs also embraced the eugenic cause. Known for celebrating grand champion sows and other masterworks of animal husbandry, they now added a “human stock” section, where competitors vied for the blue ribbon in the “Fitter Families” contest. A traveling display warned, “Some people are born to be a burden on the rest,” above a light that flashed every 15 seconds to indicate that another “$100 of your money” had just gone “for the care of a person with bad heredity.”

To help make their case, the eugenicists developed elaborate genealogies showing how certain “unfit” families had spread their defective “germ plasm”—that is, their genes—through the generations, at terrible cost to society. The true identities of these families were hidden behind fake names. But the genealogies were often fake, too, and the harsh-sounding pseudonyms like Jukes and Kallikak served as an onomatopoeic way of getting people to feel, as Fisher did, “what awful contamination can be saved the race by a wise application of eugenics.”

Genealogies of prominent Yale and Harvard men often served as a bracing and instructive contrast. Fisher looked at the 1,394 descendants of Jonathan Edwards, Class of 1720, and reported that “something like half have been public men or men of great distinction and good influence in the world.” This biologizing of social superiority

provoked one skeptic to publish a detailed account in an academic journal of how manic-depressive insanity ran through the families of Boston's Brahmins.

Yale was "not luminously worse" than others in perpetuating this "farrago of flawed science," according to Kevles. But it was bad enough. Proponents of eugenics included Yale president James R. Angell, celebrated football coach Walter Camp '80, primatologist Robert Yerkes, and Yale medical school dean Milton Winternitz. Stewart Paton, who pioneered mental health services for college students during a two-year stint at Yale in the 1920s, was a eugenicist. So was Rabbi Louis L. Mann, a lecturer at Yale, who told an audience at a 1923 birth control conference that, even in ancient times, the wise men of Israel had realized the necessity of checking the multiplication of the unfit.

But though many scholars and statesmen embraced eugenics, none, writes historian Annie L. Cot, "could rival Fisher, whose struggles in the ranks of the eugenic movement were lifelong."

For readers today, it is almost impossible to browse through the eugenics literature from before World War II without hearing intimations of Auschwitz in every line. It takes a continual effort to keep in mind that they did not know about the Holocaust then. When one early enthusiast declared that eugenics "is going to be a purifying *conflagration* some day," no one understood how horrifically prophetic those words would later sound.

Reading about Fisher, Huntington, and the rest, I felt a predictable sense of loathing: these were despicable men. But in other parts of their lives, even the worst of them was at times admirable, and I felt a queasy sense of liking. This was illogical on a personal level. Their writing was laced with animosity toward the wave of immigrants into the United States after 1890—southern and eastern Europeans (mainly Italians and Jews, respectively), yellow-peril Asians, and the drunken, misbegotten Irish. It was an era

when a Harvard anthropologist could lament "the flooding of this country with alien scum." Fisher spoke of "defectives, delinquents, and dependents."

Under the pretext of science, the eugenicists were proposing to preserve "Nordic" hegemony by breeding out my own Irish and Italian stock, among others. So why liking? Partly, it's because the idea of the white Anglo-Saxon gentry prattling about their own superiority has become a stock joke ("Too damned funny, old bean"). Ellsworth Huntington sounds about as dangerous as Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* when he declares: "An Englishman likes to work things out for himself, and is glad when an emergency throws him on his own resources. The Mediterranean and Alpine people, on the contrary, are much more docile, more willing to be led."

And partly it's because, having grown up Irish and Italian, I am aware that my people also entertain notions of our magnificence. Other ethnic groups do the same, though they are generally not so foolish, or so accustomed to power, as to issue scientific pronouncements on the topic to the less fortunate. The truth is that all humans favor in-groups, starting with the family, and we disparage those we perceive as outsiders. Treating this as only the outlaw impulse of eugenicists and Nazis is a convenient way of overlooking a hateful tendency in us all.

These eugenicists also felt disturbingly familiar in other ways. They weren't sinister characters out of some darkly lighted noir film about Nazi sympathizers, but environmentalists, peace activists, fitness buffs, healthy-living enthusiasts, inventors, and family men. If Madison Grant had not been such an ardent racist and so closely tied to Nazi genocide, he might be remembered today as one of America's greatest conservationists. "Among his many accomplishments," writes Jonathan P. Spiro in his recent biography, *Defending the Master Race,* "Grant preserved the California redwoods, saved the American bison from extinction, founded the Bronx Zoo, fought for strict gun-control laws, built the Bronx

River Parkway," and helped create Glacier, Denali, and Everglades National Parks.

Entirely apart from his reputation as an economist, Fisher enjoyed an idyllic American existence. He lived with his wife Margaret and their three children in a big house on the crest of Prospect Street, with a music room, a library, and "a 40-foot living room with a large, sunny bay window," as their son Irving recalled in his memoir, *My Father Irving Fisher.* A health enthusiast at home as well as in public, Fisher disdained cane sugar, tea, coffee, alcohol, tobacco, and bleached white flour. He often jogged in shorts around the neighborhood and liked to ride a bicycle to his classes on the Yale campus. One of his books was titled *How to Live*.

His various crusades re-quired a platoon of busy assistants. So Fisher built out from the basement of the family home onto the sloping ground in back, eventually creating ten work rooms and, young Irving recalled, a "hidden beehive of activity below decks." The office equipment included one of Fisher's own inventions, an index card filing system that made the first line of each card visible at a glance. With his wife's money, he turned it into a thriving business. When the company was bought out—it would become part of the Sperry Rand corporation—Fisher capitalized on his new wealth by buying stock on margin. By the late 1920s, he and Margaret had a fortune of $10 million.

Fisher was the son of a Congregational minister, and his driving impulse was to proselytize. Thus eugenics seemed a natural outgrowth not just of his work as an economist, but of his family heritage. It needed "to be a popular movement with a certain amount of religious flavor in it," he thought. His role as a leading apostle also seemed like a way for him to make a real mark on the world—as if his economics alone were not enough: "I do want before I die," he wrote to his wife, "to leave behind me something more than a book on Index Numbers."

But his eugenic enthusiasms drew him away from the arc of his true genius. His book *The*

Theory of Interest was “an almost complete theory of the capitalist process as a whole,” according to Harvard economist Joseph Schumpeter. But Fisher never found time to pull his ideas together into one grand synthesis, nor did he develop a school of disciples to carry on his work. His books are thus “pillars and arches of a temple that was never built,” Schumpeter wrote. “They belong to an imposing structure that the architect never presented as a tectonic unit.”

“Unfortunately,” Yale economist Ray B. Westerfield agreed, “his eagerness to promote his cause sometimes had a bad influence on his scientific attitude. It distorted his judgment.” This was never more nakedly obvious than in October 1929, when Fisher’s enthusiasm for stocks as a long-term investment led him to pronounce that the market had arrived at “a permanently high plateau.” The great Wall Street crash hit shortly after, and it turned America’s greatest economist into a national laughingstock, incidentally leaving the family fortune in ruins.

But the far grosser distortion of judgment, and of his better self, was in Fisher’s campaigning as a eugenicist. His interest in health had arisen largely from his own encounter in 1898 with tuberculosis, the disease that killed his father. It took Fisher three years of fresh air, proper diet, and close medical attention in sanatoriums around the country to regain his health. Having managed to get his own head out of the lion’s mouth, he said in 1903, he wanted to prevent “other people from getting their heads into the same predicament.” His initial approach was to lobby the government to reduce urban pollution, protect the health of mothers and children, and establish school health programs, “so that American vitality may reach its maximum development.”

But his almost religious conversion to eugenics, not long after, turned all that upside down. Two decades after his own recovery, Fisher was denouncing “hygiene to help the less fit” as “*misapplied* hygiene” and “distinctly dysgenic. … Schools for tubercular children give them better air and care than

normal school children receive." He seemed to have forgotten that he was once among those who, by his own harsh standard, deserved to have their heads held fast in the lion's mouth.

Other Yale eugenicists also allowed their work to be distorted by the cause. Robert Yerkes is remembered today as a primatologist and the founder of the Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University. But when he came to Yale in 1924, as a professor in the new field of psychobiology, he was better known for developing the first national program of intelligence testing—a program that provided an ostensibly scientific basis for the fight against immigration in the early 1920s.

Yerkes and a team of like-minded scholars had designed the test at the start of World War I, as a means "for the classification of men in order that they may be properly placed in the military service." By war's end, the US military had administered it to 1.7 million recruits. According to the test, the average native-born white American male had a mental age of 13. But his foreign-born counterparts were morons (a label coined by the eugenicists, from the Greek for "foolish"), with an average mental age barely over 11.

Yerkes wrote to key congressmen during the immigration debate to remind them of what Army testing had said about the inferiority of southern and eastern Europeans. Fisher chimed in. "The facts are known," he declared. "It is high time for the American people to put a stop to such degradation of American citizenship, and such a wrecking of the future American race."

In truth, the facts were badly flawed, and Fisher had reason to know it. Yerkes's test, which supposedly gauged innate intelligence, was mainly a measure of how long a person had been in the United States and perhaps also how well he might fit in at the local country club. Among the questions asked: "Seven-up is played with A. rackets, B. cards, C. pins, D. dice." "Garnets are usually A. yellow, B. blue, C. green, D. red." "An air-cooled engine is used in the A. Buick, B.

Packard, C. Franklin, D. Ford."

Fisher received a sharp upbraiding from a member of his organization's own immigration committee over "the shakiness of the evidence" used in its lobbying. Herbert S. Jennings, a geneticist at Johns Hopkins University, resigned from the AES in 1924, citing its "clearly illegitimate" arguments. Privately, he advised Fisher that a eugenics society was no place for serious researchers, whose work depends on freedom "from prejudice and propaganda."

Fisher had been lobbying the federal government for eugenicist policies since at least 1909, when his final report for Theodore Roosevelt's presidential commission on Americans' health and longevity devoted a chapter to the "question of race improvement through heredity." He had been fighting to limit immigration since 1914, when he coauthored a report to the American Genetic Association. It declared that "steamship agents and brokers all over Europe, and even in Asia and Africa, are today deciding for us the character of the American race of the future."

Fisher's friend, Madison Grant, likewise wrote about "being literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews." Grant became the leading advocate for state laws mandating involuntary sterilization of the "unfit" and banning interracial marriage. He also persuaded Virginia to discard its practice of granting the privileges of a white person to anyone with 15 white great-grandparents; state officials were soon sniffing out and harassing anyone with even "one drop" of non-white blood.

Fisher, Grant, and the AES wanted to restrict both the number of immigrants and their nationalities. They argued that each foreign country's annual quota should be proportional to its representation in the United States as of the 1890 census—that is, before the flood of new immigrants had entered the country. Using an outdated census was a way to discriminate against southern and eastern Europeans and

thereby to ensure, as Fisher put it in the *New York Times,* "a preponderance of immigration of the stock which originally settled this country."

The Immigration Act of 1924—with quotas based on the 1890 census—became law that May. Congress had been "hoodwinked" by the eugenicists, Representative Emanuel Celler complained, with the result that total immigration was cut in half, and immigration from targeted countries like Italy by as much as 90 percent. The law would later become a factor in preventing Jewish refugees from escaping Nazi persecution.

In Germany, an imprisoned political extremist viewed these developments with satisfaction. Writing *Mein Kampf* in his cell, Adolf Hitler complained that naturalization in Germany was not all that different from "being admitted to membership of an automobile club," and that "the child of any Jew, Pole, African, or Asian may automatically become a German citizen." Now, though, "by excluding certain races" from the right to become American citizens, the United States had held up a shining example to the world. It was the sort of reform, Hitler wrote, "on which we wish to ground the People's State."

Nazi Germany would soon become the dark apotheosis of eugenics. When compulsory sterilization began there in 1933, the Nazi physician in charge of training declared he was following "the American pathfinders Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard" (author of *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy*). Eugen Fischer, the leading Nazi eugenicist, would thank Grant and his racial theories for inspiring Germans to work toward "a better future for our Volk."

As early as 1933, the *New York Times* was noting that if you changed Madison Grant's "Nordic" to "Aryan," his arguments sounded much like "recent pronouncements and proceedings in Germany." Even so, eugenicists put Grant's name forward four times in those years for an honorary doctorate from Yale. University officials gave his backers the polite brush-off.

Other eugenicists also backed away. When Ellsworth Huntington became president of the AES in 1934, membership was shrinking. He was obliged to lay off staff and move the operation into his university office, in a mansion at 4 Hillhouse Avenue (since demolished). The harsh, coercive measures with which eugenics had made its name were likely to raise hackles in the shifting politics of the 1930s, says Brendan Matz '11PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in history at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia. So Huntington began to promote a milder brand of reform eugenics. Nevertheless, when he was organizing a conference in 1936, Huntington asked a researcher who had recently returned from Germany to report on the Nazi sterilization program. "In the face of the present psychological situation, it is not wise to laud Germany," Huntington advised, "but it is perfectly legitimate to say that in spite of certain mistakes Germany is also doing things which are desirable."

By then, Fisher himself had stopped campaigning publicly for eugenics, and no longer tried to work the notion of the nation's racial stock into economics discussions. His old ally Madison Grant died in 1937, and Fisher seemed to recognize the alarming effects of their earlier efforts together. In 1938, he joined three other economists in attacking the radio personality Father Charles Coughlin, a notorious anti-Semite, for adding "fuel to the already blazing flames of intolerance and bigotry." A year later, he was one of the signatories to a public letter issued by Christian and Jewish institutions, cautioning Americans "against propaganda, oral or written" that sought to turn classes, races, or religious groups against one another. The letter warned, poignantly: "The fires of prejudice burn quickly and disastrously. What may begin as polemics against a class or group may end with persecution, murder, pillage, and dispossession of that group."

Fisher survived World War II, dying in 1947 at the age of 80. His major causes by then were warding off deflation and requiring banks to hold larger reserves against their deposits,

proposals that remain relevant in the post–Lehman Brothers era. We do not know how Fisher, Yerkes, Huntington, or other eugenicists responded to the discovery of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and other centers of racial hygiene. No doubt they were horrified.

Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* would turn up once more after the war, at Nuremberg. Hitler's personal physician Karl Brandt had been charged with brutal medical experiments and murder in the concentration camps. His lawyers introduced Grant's book into evidence in his defense, arguing that the Nazis had merely done what prominent American scholars had advocated. Brandt was found guilty and sentenced to death.

We know better now, of course. And yet eugenic ideas still linger just beneath the skin, in what seem to be more innocent forms. We tend to think, for instance, that if we went to Yale, or better yet, went to Yale and married another Yalie, our children will be smart enough to go to Yale, too. The concept of regression toward the mean—invented, ironically, by Francis Galton, the original eugenicist—says, basically: don't count on it. But outsiders still sometimes share our eugenic delusions. Would-be parents routinely place ads in college newspapers and online offering to pay top dollar to gamete donors who are slender, attractive, of the desired ethnic group, with killer SAT scores—and an Ivy League education.

Irving Fisher and the other Yale eugenicists would no doubt rejoice that the university's germ plasm is still so highly valued—at up to ten times the price for other colleges. But if they looked more carefully at the evidence, they would discover that these highly desirable donors are now often the grandsons and granddaughters of the very immigrants they once worked so hard to eliminate.