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Dear Mr Nash.

“Biography: The Trials of Marie Stopes”

I read your article “Biography: The Trials of Marie Stopes” with interest.¹

I have three points to make regarding your article:

Firstly, it is false to state that the main message of Stopes’ life was that “women of all classes...should have the choice about whether to bear children.” The evidence against your assertion comes from the words and actions of Stopes herself, as well as from the Galton Institute (formerly the Eugenics Society).

Secondly, you assert that Sutherland’s “primary concern was maintaining traditional familial roles”, but do not provide any information about the alternative to this position proposed by Stopes. As I will outline below, Sutherland opposed Stopes because he believed that her agenda would further impoverish working class people and impose a “Servile State” upon them. When the “Servile State” is held up as the alternative, “traditional familial roles” would appear to be the more attractive option. By failing to outline the position that Sutherland was opposing, his position is misrepresented.

Thirdly, when you do mention Stopes interest in “eugenics”, it is telling that you describe it as “troubling”. I understand why you and your readers would find British class-based eugenics troubling: it was a vile ideology. Your use of the word may even indicate that your position is closer to Sutherland’s than you might think!

“women of all classes...should have the choice about whether to bear children.”

You stated that “the main message of [Stopes’] life” was that “women of all classes...should have the choice about whether to bear children.” If you look at the messages expressed by Stopes during her lifetime, they reveal that she sought to prevent lower class Britons from producing children, not to give them choice.

On the second day of the *Stopes v. Sutherland* trial Stopes stated that she aimed for a:

“reduction of the birth rate at the wrong part and increase of the birth rate at the right end of the social scale” (Femina Books, 1967, p. 76)

Her counsel, Sir Patrick Hastings, K.C., then asked her: “Would you, in your own words, describe to us in a few sentences what are the objects and purposes of your Society?”² and she replied:

¹ Disclosure: I am the grandson of Dr. Halliday Sutherland whom you mentioned in your article. Given that my relationship is likely to lead to the perception of bias, I have cited references to the material I have used to support the assertions I make.

“The object of the Society is, if possible, to counteract the steady evil which has been growing for a good many years of the reduction of the birth rate just on the part of the thrifty, wise, well-contented, and generally sound members of our community, and the reckless breeding from the C.3³ end, and the semi-feeble-minded, the careless, who are proportionately increasing in our community because of the slowing of the birth rate at the other end of the social scale. Statistics show that every year the birth rate from the worst end of our community is increasing in proportion to the birth rate at the better end, and it was in order to try to right that grave social danger that I embarked upon this work.” (Femina Books, 1967, p. 76)

At that stage, Stopes dispensed contraceptives as a means to discourage working class people from having children. That was not the end-point of her agenda, however, and at the time of the trial, she had been campaigning for compulsory sterilisation of “inferior” people for several years.⁴

- In 1918, at the National Birth Rate Commission she had suggested that “a very simple solution in regard to the hopelessly bad cases, bad through inherent disease, or drunkenness or character...would be the sterilisation of the parent.” (National Birth-Rate Commission 1918-20, 1920, p. 133)
- In her 1920 book, *Radiant Motherhood*, she urged Parliament to pass laws to compulsorily sterilise the “degenerate, feeble minded and unbalanced” (Stopes, 1920). In case this message went unheeded, she took steps to bring it to the attention of the Prime Minister himself. (Rose, 1992, p. 138)
- In November 1922, “before the election, she sent out a questionnaire to parliamentary candidates asking them to sign a rather curiously worded declaration: ‘I agree that the present position of breeding chiefly from the C3 population and burdening and discouraging the A1 is nationally deplorable, and if I am elected to Parliament I will press the Ministry of Health to give such scientific information to the Ante-natal Clinics, Welfare Centres and other institutions in its control as will curtail the C3 and increase the A1.’” It is a measure of Stopes’ influence that she received 150 replies. (Rose, 1992, p. 161)

Towards the end of your article, you mentioned Stopes’ “interest in eugenics”. Coming as it does at the end of the article, almost as an afterthought, and accompanied by the observation that no one is perfect, seems to suggest eugenics was a minor side-issue in her life.

Yet the evidence shows that eugenics was at the core of Stopes’ birth controlling activities. It was reflected in the name of the “Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress” (“SCBC”)

² The *Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress*, which had been established by Stopes to run the Mother’s Clinic.

³ “C.3” was a term used by the army to categorise the condition of recruits. “A.1” were the best, “C.3” were the worst, unfit for military service.

⁴ It is worth noting that the use of the term “inferior” is untypical of the terms that Stopes used to describe those who should be sterilised for two reasons. Firstly her description of those less-fortunate members of British society was, at best, unsympathetic and at worst venomous and demeaning to the urban poor. Secondly the targets of her campaign for sterilisation were wide-ranging that has led one journalist—Zoe Williams of *The Guardian*—to write: “Her eugenics programme was actually slightly to the right of Hitler’s, just because her definition of defective is so broad. There are certainly issues of *Birth Control News* that seem to suggest, just with their news agenda, that some people should be sterilised for nebulous reasons of defectiveness, like not being rich enough.” (Williams, 2011)

established to run the Mothers' Clinic, and in the brand name of cervical cap dispensed there: "PRORACE" (Science and Society Picture Library, n.d.).

The historian, Richard A. Soloway, gave the *Galton Memorial Lecture* in 1996—*Marie Stopes Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement*—in which he said that Stopes and her husband:

"described as one of the "bedrock" tenets of the [SCBC] as the belief "that the haphazard production of children by ignorant, coerced, or diseased mothers is profoundly detrimental to the race." Another was the conviction that "many men and women...should be prevented from procreating children at all, because of their individual ill health, or the diseased and degenerate nature of the offspring that they may be expected to produce." At the same time, the SCBC regretted "the relatively small families of those best fitted to care for children." In accordance with its motto, "Babies in the right place," it was as much an aim of the SCBC "to secure conception" to those couples, as it was "to furnish security from conception to those who are racially diseased, already overburdened with children, or in any specific way unfitted for parenthood." (The Galton Institute, 1996, p. 61)

These words and these actions do not support the statement that the "message" of Stopes' life was that she wanted women of all classes to have the choice about whether to bear children. In fact, they tend to support the opposite conclusion.

Dr Sutherland's "primary concern was maintaining traditional familial roles" ...but what was the alternative proposed by Stopes?

In your article you state that Stopes' actions "didn't go down particularly well with those whose primary concern was maintaining traditional familial roles," and named Dr. Halliday Sutherland as a member of that group. Without providing any further information, and without explaining the eugenic agenda behind Stopes' birth controlling activities, the reader is left the impression that Sutherland was a conservative patriarch who opposed "choice" and that he wanted to keep women in the home, securely chained to the kitchen sink.

Yet his 1922 book *Birth Control* reveals that when he attacked what he called "organised poverty" in England, the attack was from the political left. In one passage called "Severance of the Inhabitants from the Soil," he wrote:

"It was not a high birth-rate that established organised poverty in England. In the sixteenth century the greater part of the land, including common land belonging to the poor, was seized by the rich. They began robbing the Catholic Church, and they ended by robbing the people. Once machinery was introduced in the eighteenth century, the total wealth of England was enormously increased; but the vast majority of the people had little share in this increase of wealth that accrued from machinery, because only a small portion of the people possessed capital. More children came, but they came to conditions of poverty and of child-labour in the mills. In countries where more natural and stable social conditions exist, and where there are many small owners of land, large families, so far from being a cause of poverty, are of the greatest assistance to their parents and to themselves. There are means whereby poverty could be reduced, but artificial birth control would only increase the total poverty of the State, and therefore of the individual.

"From early down to Tudor times, the majority of the inhabitants lived on small holdings. For example, in the fifteenth century there were twenty-one small holdings on a particular area measuring 160 acres. During the sixteenth century the number of holdings on this area

had fallen to six, and in the seventeenth century the 160 acres became one farm. Occasionally an effort was made to check this process, and by a statute of Elizabeth penalties were enacted against building any cottages “without laying four acres of land thereto.” On the other hand, acres upon acres were given to the larger landowners by a series of Acts for the enclosure of common land, whereby many labourers were deprived of their land. From the reign of George I to that of George III nearly four thousand enclosure bills were passed. These wrongs have not been righted.” (Sutherland, 1922, pp. Ch.2, Section 2)

The point here is that Sutherland argued that Stopes’ eugenic agenda would lead to the further impoverishment and exploitation of the poorer classes:

“...if children are to be denied to the poor as a privilege of the rich, then it would be easy to exploit the women of the poorer classes. If women have no young children why should they be exempt from the economic pressure applied to men?” adding:

“The English poor have already lost even the meaning of the word “property,” and if the birth controllers⁵ had their way the meaning of the word “home” would soon follow. The aim of birth control is generally masked by falsehood, but the urging of this policy on the poor points unmistakably to the Servile State.”

The Servile State, a concept that Sutherland borrowed from Hilaire Belloc, was a state in which the poor were prevented from having children and had no societal role other than to work.

[“She had a troubling interest in eugenics as many leading academics did at the time...”](#)

You state that Stopes wasn’t without her faults and then mention her “troubling interest in eugenics”.

The use of the word begs the question: Troubling—to whom?

Given that Stopes’ interest in eugenics was “unapologetic” (Cohen, 1996, p. 78) and given that she held eugenic views until her death in 1958 (leaving her Clinic to the Eugenic Society (Rose, 1992, p. 244)), we can assume that Stopes was untroubled by her eugenic views.

The only people left who might be troubled by her interest in eugenics are the author of the article and his readers.

That they might be “troubled” is unsurprising. Any reasonable person today who has knowledge of British class-based eugenics, particularly the branch known as “negative eugenics,” find it abhorrent.

If I am correct in suggesting that you do find eugenics troubling, I would ask you to consider this: [Dr. Halliday Sutherland felt about eugenics the same way you do](#). The difference is that Sutherland did not have the clear signpost of hindsight that was provided by Nazi crimes in the 1930s and ‘40s.

Another difference is that, given eugenics was supported by the most influential and powerful persons of his era—including Balfour, Beveridge, Churchill, Galton, Keynes, Pearson, Russell, Shaw, Stopes, Webb, Webb and Wells—publicly opposing eugenics would have taken great courage.

⁵ The terms “birth control” and “eugenics” were “so intertwined as to be synonymous” in the inter-war years according to Professor Jane Carey (Source: “The Racial Imperatives of Sex: Birth Control and Eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the Interwar Years”. *Women’s History Review* 21 (Monash University). 5: 753-552.

Sutherland's opposition to eugenics began while he was working as a tuberculosis pioneer in the slums of London. Tuberculosis afflicted the poor around three times more than the wealthier classes.

At that time, no less an authority than Karl Pearson F.R.S., Professor of Eugenics at London University, said that:⁶

"...in a primitive society a harsh environment undoubtedly checks the survival of all forms of physical and mental defect. Further, in civilised society all legislation which provides nurture for the feeble at the cost of the socially fitter must be detrimental to racial efficiency UNLESS (i) it is accompanied by some check to the reproduction of the unfit, or (ii) we can show that nurture rather than nature dominates the production of the mentally or physically desirable members of our community.

"Now I will not dogmatically assert that environment matters not at all; phases of it may be discovered which produce more effect than any we have yet been able to deal with. But I think it is safe to say that the influence of environment is not one-fifth of heredity, and quite possibly not one-tenth of it. There is no real comparison between nature and nurture; it is essentially the man who makes his environment; and not the environment that makes the man. The race will progress fastest where consciously or unconsciously success in life, power to reproduce its kind, lies within native worth. Hard environment may be the salvation of a race, easy environment its destruction. If you will think this point out in detail, I believe you will see the explanation of many great historical movements. Barbarism has too often triumphed over civilisation, because a hard environment had maintained, an easy environment suspended, the force of natural selection – the power of the nature factor." (Pearson, 1910)

Pearson's eugenics laboratory had produced a number of studies on tuberculosis and he concluded that spending of state funds on tuberculosis should be cancelled. The cure for tuberculosis he said was to breed out the tuberculous "stocks".

"It is a counsel of despair to spend millions when you have no evidence of the efficiency of the expenditure, because you have nothing better to propose. In the next place, why should we do something when we have nothing better to do? To practice the ineffectual as if it were a proven cure checks the road to better things. Admit it that there is no cure for phthisis and it incites men to find one, far more actively than to praise existing "cures".

"But Eugenists have something better to propose. No one can study the pedigrees of pathological states, insanity, mental defect, albinism, &c., collected by our laboratory, without being struck by the large proportion of tuberculous members – occasionally the tuberculous man is a brilliant member of our race – but the bulk of the tuberculous belong to stocks which we want *ab initio* to discourage. Everything which tends to check the multiplication of the unfit, to emphasize that the fertility of the physically and mentally healthy, will *pro tanto* aid Nature's method of reducing the phthisical death-rate. That is what the Eugenist proclaims as the "better thing to do", and £1,500,000 spent in

⁶ Pearson gave the Presidential Address at the Annual General Meeting of the Social and Political Education League on 28 April, 1910. His topic: *Nature and Nurture: The Problem of the Future*.

encouraging healthy parentage would do more than the establishment of a sanatorium in every township.” (Pearson, 1912)

At this time, Sutherland was Medical Officer at the *St. Marylebone Dispensary for the Prevention of Consumption* (St Marylebone Dispensary for the Prevention of Consumption, 1911, p. 4). He was aware that Pearson’s ideas, if adopted, would have a deadly impact on his patients. In November 1912, Sutherland rebutted Pearson’s assertions in the *British Medical Journal*. (Sutherland, 1912)

In 1917, after an interval caused by active service in the war, Sutherland spoke out against eugenists. In a 1917 speech he railed against them as being a major obstacle to the eradication of tuberculosis:

“But why should you set out to prevent this infection and to cure the disease? There are some self-styled eugenists...race breeders with the souls of cattle-breeders—who declaim that the prevention of disease is not in itself a good thing. They say the efficiency of the State is based upon what they call ‘the survival of the fittest.’ This war has smashed their rhetorical phrase. Who talks now about survival of the fittest, or thinks himself fit because he survives? I don’t know what they mean. I do know that in preventing disease you are not preserving the weak, but conserving the strong. And I do know that those evil conditions which will kill a weakly child within a few months of birth, and slay another when he reaches the teens, will destroy yet another when he comes to adult life.” (Sutherland, 1917)

Given Sutherland’s background in publicly opposing eugenics, it was perhaps inevitable that when Stopes established her eugenic Mothers’ Clinic, he would oppose her as well.

If you have any questions please don’t hesitate to contact me through contact page at hallidaysutherland.com

Yours faithfully,

Mark Sutherland

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