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EUGENICISTS, QUAKERS, AND RUFUS JONES, 1893-1938

DAVID HARRINGTON WATT

During his lifetime, Rufus Jones's skills as a writer, speaker, and organizer won him a great many admirers. In the first half of the twentieth century, Jones was one of the most-admired Quakers in the world. Jones was also, as scholars such as Leigh Schmidt and Matthew Hedstrom have shown, one of the more influential liberal Protestants in the United States.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, a great many American liberal Protestants avidly embraced what they thought of as the "science" of eugenics. Thus far, however, Jones's attitudes toward eugenics have not attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Scholars have not spent much time determining whether Jones moved in circles where eugenic ideas were prevalent, expressed himself in ways that echoed the rhetoric used by proponents of eugenics, or went out of his way to get along with eugenicists. Nor has there been much inquiry into whether Jones admired scientists who were deeply committed to eugenics, or whether he lent his support to organizations that propagated eugenic ideas. This essay attempts, in a modest way, to begin to address such lacunae in the scholarly literature.¹

I ought to confess, at the outset, that this essay is driven by something other than dispassionate curiosity. It grows out of a conversation I had with a brilliant colleague, Isaac May, who mentioned in passing that he had come across a primary source that highlighted Rufus Jones's connections to the American Eugenics Society. The text began an attempt to understand the nature of Jones's connections to that organization and then became an effort to put those connections into a larger framework. Because I teach courses on Jones's life and thought at a school with which he was closely associated, Haverford College, my interest in Jones's attitudes toward eugenics is personal as well as professional.²

I should also confess that I have not been able to uncover many texts that shed light on Jones's attitudes toward eugenics. This essay, which suggests that Jones probably was sympathetic to eugenic ideas, is both speculative and tentative. It focuses on the years between 1893 (when Jones began teaching at Haverford) and 1938 (the year he traveled to Berlin to gather information about the conditions under which German Jews were living and to look for ways that the American Friends Service Committee might assist them).

One more preliminary note: It might be helpful for me to say more about one of the words in this essay's title, "eugenicists," before proceeding. For our present purposes, I would suggest that we think of eugenicists as an extremely diverse set of people who were united by a hope that selective breeding of particular human populations could improve the quality of those populations. Eugenicists tried to encourage people who came from "good stock" to reproduce and to discourage people who came from "bad stock" from doing that.³ Many eugenicists believed that people who came from certain "races" ("the Nordic race," for example) were more likely to come from "good stock" than those who came from other "races" (for instance, "the Mediterranean race"). Many also believed that institutions and nations controlled by people who came from "good stock" ought to discriminate against people who came from "bad stock."⁴

COMING FROM "GOOD STOCK"

Jones sometimes expressed himself in ways that are somewhat reminiscent of the ways that proponents of eugenics expressed their ideas. From time to time, he displayed an interest in determining the "stock" from which he and other Quakers came. In *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers* (1928), Jones considered George Fox's "stock" and declared that it "was of excellent quality on both his father's and mother's side."⁵ In *Finding the Trail of Life* (1926), Jones noted that many of his own ancestors came from "good English stock." He also suggested that there was a natural affinity between "the ancestral lines" from which he sprang and the Quaker religion.⁶ In one of his many essays on mysticism, Jones suggested that he had inherited his mystical inclinations from the Celts. "I was born with a large strain of Celtic stock," he said, "and my racial inheritance links me up with the men who in the dim past went on eager quests for the Holy Grail.

That spirit of quest is as much a part of my elemental nature as is the color of my eyes and hair.”⁷

Jones sometimes wrote as though he believed that some people may have inherited unfortunate characteristics from their ancestors that could not possibly be overcome. Consider, for instance, an essay he published in 1895 called “The Cuban War.” In it, Jones said that Cuban people were “incompetent to conduct an efficient administration.” Cubans were, he explained, “negroes [sic] and mixed races, without general education or self-control.”⁸ In another essay from the 1890s, “The Sifting of the Immigrants,” Jones suggested that many recent immigrants to the United States were incapable of becoming good Americans. He said that “the strikes and court records have been showing us that we are receiving hordes of the worst type of human beings from the shores of the Old World. Our cities are being overpopulated with material which cannot be assimilated to our free institutions, and it is now becoming evident that in many cases we have opened our doors to receive paupers, criminals, and red-handed anarchists.” Jones went on to say that “the number of men engaged in recent riots who bore foreign and unpronounceable names” seemed to suggest that “foreign elements” were to blame for a good deal of that which “threatens and disturbs our social and political condition.”⁹

HAVERFORD COLLEGE, BLACKS, AND JEWS

In 1898, a few years after he published “The Sifting of the Immigrants” and “The Cuban War,” Jones was asked to join the Board of Trustees of Bryn Mawr College, an institution founded by Quakers whose history was intertwined with that of Haverford College. Two years later, M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr, forwarded to Jones a letter that Hugo Münsterberg had sent her. Münsterberg, who was Jewish, was a protégé of William James. He had written the letter in support of a man who hoped to land a teaching job at Bryn Mawr. After reading the letter, Jones told Thomas that he thought the letter was rather high-handed. In response, Thomas told Jones that she thought the letter was “in exceeding bad taste.” She went on to say that she hoped “that we shall never have a Jew in our Bryn Mawr College faculty.”

There is, as far as I can tell, no evidence to suggest that Jones took umbrage at Thomas’s statement.¹⁰ It would have been strange if he had. During Jones’s lifetime, Haverford discriminated against

people who were not white Christians. The leaders of Haverford College eventually did allow Jews to join the faculty, but they did not make that decision until the 1940s. By then, Jones had already retired.¹¹ While Jones taught there, Haverford's student body did include some Jews—but not many. During the 1922–1923 academic year, for instance, less than two percent of Haverford's students were Jewish.¹² The paucity of Jewish students was no accident. For many years, Haverford's leaders used a quota system to make sure that the student body was overwhelmingly Christian.¹³

During the years that Jones taught at Haverford, there were few people of color in the college's student body. A Black student from Jamaica, Osmond C. Pitter, graduated from Haverford in 1926, but no African American students were allowed until long after Jones had retired.¹⁴ Haverford's reluctance to admit Black students did not set it apart from other Quaker educational institutions. The Germantown Friends School, George School, Swarthmore College, and Westtown School also discriminated against Black people.¹⁵ So too did many Quaker congregations.¹⁶ The degree to which segregationist assumptions suffused the Quaker subculture of which Jones was a part is, as Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniel have clearly demonstrated, difficult to overstate.¹⁷

THE QUAKER SUBCULTURE

The Quaker subculture produced a good many men and women who embraced eugenic ideas. Committees created by prominent Quaker organizations declared that “sociology and eugenics” both made it abundantly clear that “there should be a relatively large number of children from those parents who can support and educate them, and a relatively smaller number of children from less qualified parents.”¹⁸ Quaker writers such Nellie May Smith, the author of *The Three Gifts of Life: A Girl's Responsibility for Race Progress* (1912), told readers that they ought to embrace the truths discovered by the science of eugenics.¹⁹ M. Carey Thomas also embraced eugenics. Thomas praised books—Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World-Supremacy* (1920), for example—written by prominent eugenicists. She also gave speeches in which she told Bryn Mawr students that history showed how neither the “Negroes of Africa, the Indians, the Eskimos, the South Sea Islanders [nor] the Turks” had ever engaged in “continuous mental activity.”²⁰

HENRY GODDARD AND THE KALLIKAKS

A member of the Quaker subculture who eventually became one of the best-known eugenicists in the United States, Henry Goddard, was a close friend of Jones. Goddard and Jones knew each other during childhood (both were reared in rural Maine by pious Quaker families), and they studied together at three different schools: Oak Grove Seminary, the Friends School in Providence (Rhode Island), and Haverford College. In 1891, when Jones was serving as the principal of Oak Grove Seminary, he invited Goddard to come teach there. Goddard taught at Oak Grove between 1891 and 1893, and when Jones left to join the faculty of Haverford College, Goddard succeeded him as principal of the school. When Jones took a one-year sabbatical from Haverford so that he could study at Harvard, Goddard taught the classes that would have ordinarily been taught by Jones.

In 1900, Goddard began teaching at the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland, New Jersey.²¹ Twelve years later, he published a book, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, that presented some of the theories about human intelligence that he had developed while teaching in Vineland. *The Kallikak Family*, a short book based on research that has been judged by many as exceedingly shoddy, was written for general readers rather than for scientists. It received an enormous amount of attention in the United States and overseas.²²

The Kallikak Family focused on Martin Kallikak Sr. (the name was a pseudonym) and his descendants. Kallikak, Goddard said, had inherited “good English blood.” During the Revolutionary War, when he was still in his teens, Kallikak momentarily departed “from the paths of rectitude” and had sex with “a feeble-minded girl” whom he had met at a tavern. That union produced “a line of mental defectives that [was] truly appalling.” One of those descendants—Deborah Kallikak (also a pseudonym)—was one of the “feeble-minded” persons who lived at the school where Goddard taught.²³

According to the story Goddard told, Martin Kallikak’s behavior became much more respectable after his unfortunate encounter with the girl at the tavern. Eventually he had the good fortune of marrying “a young woman who [came from] a good Quaker family.” None of the products of that union between “the Quakeress” and Kallikak were “mental defectives,” and many of them lived exemplary lives.

In Goddard's view, external environmental factors could not possibly explain why one side of Kallikak's family was so "bad" and the other so "good." The differences between the two sides were matters of heredity. The "blood" of side of the family—the Quaker side—was uniformly "good." The blood of the other side of the family was mixed. It was as simple as that.²⁴

The social implications of the Kallikaks' story, Goddard said, were straightforward. Intelligent people needed to find ways to keep people with hereditary predispositions toward "feeble-mindedness" from reproducing. One way to do that, according to Goddard, was to place such people in "colonies" where they could be prevented from producing children. But that was not enough. Intelligent people also needed to look, Goddard said, for ways of sterilizing people who came from stock that made them especially susceptible to feeble-mindedness.²⁵

No evidence that I know of indicates that Jones ever formally endorsed Goddard's ideas about eugenics. But neither do I know of any evidence that suggests that Jones had difficulty getting along with members of the Quaker subculture who embraced eugenics. In fact, Jones seems to have taken a certain amount of pride in the connections between eugenics and Quakerism. In his magisterial *The Later Periods of Quakerism*, published in 1921, Jones went out of his way to praise the work of Francis Galton, an Englishman who played a pivotal role in the early history of eugenics and whose work influenced the way that people like Goddard thought about heredity. Although Jones admitted that Galton was not "actually a member of the Society [of Friends]," he included Galton in his discussion of the most important Quaker scientists of the nineteenth century. He did so on the grounds that Galton "came of a distinguished Quaker family, and received much from Quaker influences." Jones referred to Galton as the "founder of the science of eugenics" and a "genius."²⁶

MADISON GRANT AND THE AMERICAN EUGENICS SOCIETY

Five years after Jones published *The Later Periods of Quakerism*, Madison Grant and four other eugenicists assembled in Grant's home to create the American Eugenics Society (AES).²⁷ Madison Grant figures in one scholarly historical account of eugenics in the United States as "the nation's most influential racist."²⁸ He was the author of a widely circulating book—*The Passing of the Great Race*

(1916)—in which he argued that “the Nordic race” was responsible for humankind’s greatest achievements and that the greatness of the United States was a result of the outsized role that race had played in its creation and development. Grant asserted that the power of “the Nordic race” was waning. Other, lesser races were, Grant said, gaining more and more power in the United States. Old-stock Americans, he alleged, were “being literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews.” Grant warned his readers that the “dwarf stature, peculiar mentality and ruthless concentration on self-interest” of Polish Jews were qualities “being engrafted upon the stock of the nation.”²⁹

The American Eugenics Society, which received generous financial support from George Eastman and John D. Rockefeller, conducted much of its work through a set of fourteen standing committees.³⁰ The work of one of its most important committees, the Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen, was directed by a Presbyterian minister named Henry Strong Huntington. In letters he sent to potential members of the Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen, Huntington explained that the group would “work out methods of forwarding eugenics through the churches.” Rufus Jones was one of the religious leaders Huntington invited to join. Jones accepted the invitation. His name was featured on the committee’s letterhead.³¹

Like many other organizations, the Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen eventually succumbed to pressures associated with the Great Depression. But during the late 1920s, the committee was well funded and able to undertake a wide range of initiatives. The initiative that attracted the most attention was the committee’s sponsorship of an annual sermon contest. Participants were required to preach a sermon with the title “Religion and Eugenics: Does the church have any responsibility for improving human stock?” (The clergyman who won the contest was awarded a \$500 prize.) From their pulpits, clergymen throughout the nation assured their congregants that eugenics could offer a way to “establish a race of people who approximate the Christian ideal” and fill “the Earth with Christlike men and women.” As they prepared their sermons, participants in the contest drew on both the scriptures and the works of eugenicists such as Galton and Goddard.³²

According to Christine Rosen, the author of a superb analysis of religious leaders’ attitudes toward eugenics, Huntington did not expect many members of the AES’s Committee on Cooperation

with Clergymen to devote a great deal of their energy to personally promoting the cause of eugenics. But simply by “affixing their names to the Committee,” Rosen argues, the religious leaders whom Huntington recruited “brought inestimable influence to the eugenics movement.”³³

BASED ON THEIR OWN PHILOSOPHY AND EXPERIENCE

The Nazis’ murderous campaigns against disabled persons, Jews, so-called “non-Aryan Christians,” Roma, and other groups is one of the most notorious expressions of eugenic practices in all of history. In order to fully understand Jones’s views on eugenics, we would have to systematically examine his many efforts to assist the people whom the Nazis were persecuting.³⁴ This brief essay does not do that. Instead, it examines only a single facet of Jones’s efforts to aid European Jews: a trip that he and two other Friends—George Walton and Robert Yarnall—made to Berlin in 1938 on behalf of American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). By then, Jones’s involvement with the American Eugenics Society had come to an end. But the way Jones acted in 1938 when meeting with Nazis—some of whom were great admirers of the work of Grant, Goddard, and Galton—does not demonstrate that he had come to see eugenics an absurd pseudoscience. Jones’s behavior during the trip indicates that, even in the late 1930s, he was willing to lend a sympathetic ear to people who were fanatically committed to eugenic ideas.³⁵

Jones, Walton, and Yarnall arrived in Berlin on December 8, 1938, and left the city on December 22. While there, the three men, who thought of themselves as members of an “investigating committee,” met with Nazis, Jews, and many other individuals. Jones and Walton wrote a five-page memo about the trip, which they called “Germany Through Quaker Eyes.” According to the memo, feeding German Jews had become only a “secondary need.” People who wanted to help Jews should, the memo recommended, focus most of their attention on helping Jews emigrate. There was no time to lose. “Quick mass action” was urgently needed.³⁶

A great deal of “Germany Through Quaker Eyes” was devoted to analyzing the way that National Socialists thought about race and heredity. The memo noted that the Nazis’ view of the world had been profoundly shaped by ideas set forth in Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s “epoch-making book” *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*.

(In that text, which was published in 1899 and translated into English in 1911, Chamberlain advanced a set of arguments that resembled, at least in some respects, the arguments Grant made in *The Passing of the Great Race*.³⁷) The Nazis believed, Jones and Walton said, that

the Nordic race, the pure Nordic blood, is the highest revelation of the Eternal Nature of Things on this planet, and it consecrates the German soil to a holy purpose. It is an essential part of this theory of race that the presence of the Jewish race on this holy soil, and especially the contamination of the Nordic strain by a mixture of Jewish blood is the deepest possible defilement and taint.

The National Socialists, Jones and Walton reported, believed that “the Jew [had] no place in Germany. He must go.”³⁸

The memo that Jones and Walton produced made it clear that Nazism and Christianity were incompatible. It also noted that some of the Nazis’ ideas about race appeared to be “absurd.” But “Germany Through Quaker Eyes” did not contend that the Nazis’ theories about race and heredity made it impossible for Nazis and Quakers to converse with one another. Not at all: the memo emphasized the attentive, courteous, and respectful manner with which the Nazis interacted with the Friends. And it explicitly stated that while the members of the committee were in Berlin, they had “learned to understand the Nazi viewpoint and accept it as sincere and based upon their philosophy and experience.”³⁹

The meaning of that phrase is not entirely clear. It is possible that Jones and Walton inserted those words in their memo in order to signal that what the Nazis said about their intentions to create a Germany without Jews ought not to be taken lightly. The two Friends might have been trying to highlight their belief that the AFSC needed to redouble its efforts to assist German Jews who were trying to emigrate. If that was indeed the message that Jones and Walton were trying to communicate, then it was a message that many Jewish leaders in Berlin would have fully endorsed.⁴⁰

In any case, the memo’s emphasis on the sincerity of the Nazis’ beliefs was congruent with Jones’s overall approach to dealing with the National Socialists he met while in Berlin. For the most part, Jones strove to avoid confronting the Nazis. Instead, he tried to find common ground. When Jones spoke with Nazis, he told them that the committee he represented had not sent him to Berlin to see who

was “to blame for the trouble which may exist” or “to judge or to criticize.” All the committee was trying to do, Jones said, was “to understand the present situation” and find ways to alleviate human suffering.⁴¹

Jones’s evaluations of what the Nazis said and did when they met with Friends were surprisingly charitable. As a general rule, Nazis were, Jones acknowledged, “hard and brutal-minded men.” But his interactions with Nazis had shown him, he said, that they were also people who—when exposed to the miraculous power of “the way of love”—could exhibit an authentic “gentleness” of spirit. His interactions with National Socialists, Jones reported, had convinced him that these were people who could respond “thoughtfully” to things that Friends said, accede (albeit somewhat grudgingly) to requests that Friends made, make promises to Friends, and carry out a great many (though not all) of the promises that they had made.⁴²

Jones’s sanguine interpretation of the Nazis’ words and deeds could be viewed as shockingly naïve. It could also be seen as an expression of an admirable determination to look for—and respond to—“that of God in every man.” That is not for me to say. But it does seem clear that during his trip to Berlin, Jones made a special effort to avoid dehumanizing or demonizing Nazis. It is also likely, I think, that Jones was far more interested during that trip in understanding than in challenging the Nazis’ ideas about race and heredity.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Given all this, can we be certain that Jones was a eugenicist? Based on the evidence presented in this essay, some readers might be willing to say that we can be. For a variety of reasons, I am not willing to go that far. For the sake of brevity, I will list only four of those reasons here. First, it is possible that Jones praised Galton’s writings on eugenics without having read them thoroughly and that if Jones had fully understood Galton’s arguments, he would not have accepted them. Second, very little of the correspondence between Jones and Huntington has been preserved in the archives of Haverford College. It is conceivable that some of the letters I have been unable to examine might indicate that Jones agreed to serve on Huntington’s committee without fully understanding the aims of the American Eugenics Society or the ideas of its founders. Third, it is also possible that Jones wrote letters to

the eugenicists he knew well—Thomas and Goddard, for instance—in which he told them that he found their views objectionable. I’ve not been able to locate letters of that nature, but this does not prove that such letters were never written. Fourth, to flatly declare that Jones was a eugenicist would imply that he was a eugenicist in the same way that Galton, Goddard, and Grant were. He wasn’t: Grant, Goddard, and Galton devoted a fair proportion of their lives to promoting the cause of eugenics, and Jones did not. Jones was far less interested in eugenics than he was in many other topics: peace, mysticism, Quaker history, and the work of William James, for example.

The evidence presented in this essay does, however, demonstrate that Jones sometimes went out of his way to get along with eugenicists. It also shows that Jones supported the work of the American Eugenics Society. Jones, the evidence indicates, moved in circles that were suffused with eugenic sentiment. It is clear that he sometimes used language that resembled the language used by people who embraced eugenic ideas. And there can be no doubt that Jones praised the work of a man—Francis Galton—who played a leading role in the creation of the “science” of eugenics.

When we are writing accounts of Rufus Jones’s life and work, then, we shouldn’t shy away from thinking about the possible connections between Jones and the eugenics movement. We should examine them as fully as we can—far more fully than they have been examined in this essay—and consider how those connections might affect the way we think about Jones and about twentieth-century Quakerism.

ENDNOTES

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38. Jones and Walton, "Germany Through Quaker Eyes."
39. Jones and Walton, "Germany Through Quaker Eyes."
40. Schmitt, *Quakers and Nazis*, 109.
41. Jones, "Our Day in the German Gestapo," 266.
42. Jones, "Our Day in the German Gestapo," 266–277.