

# Eugenics in the Irish Free State 1922-1939

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## Background

Population decreased by 3.8 Million: 1841-1911  
92.6% Catholic population: 1926  
1,563,710 emigrated: 1876-1921  
70 per 1,000 infant mortality rate: 1930-32

- Eugenics seeks the improvement of the human race and the progression of human evolution.
- This comes in two forms; negative seeks to weed out the 'degenerate' population, while positive intends to breed more beneficial members of society - this was the form that the Irish Free State followed.
- The Irish Free State encouraged the reproduction of the Irish 'race' in response to demographic issues.
- Eugenics is heavily influenced by nationalism; in creating a nation, one creates an ideal citizen - The Irish speaking, rural, Catholic population was favoured and encouraged to reproduce.
- This type of eugenics was about building a strong nation (rather than race or class) and was a response to modernisation and the threat to rural living.

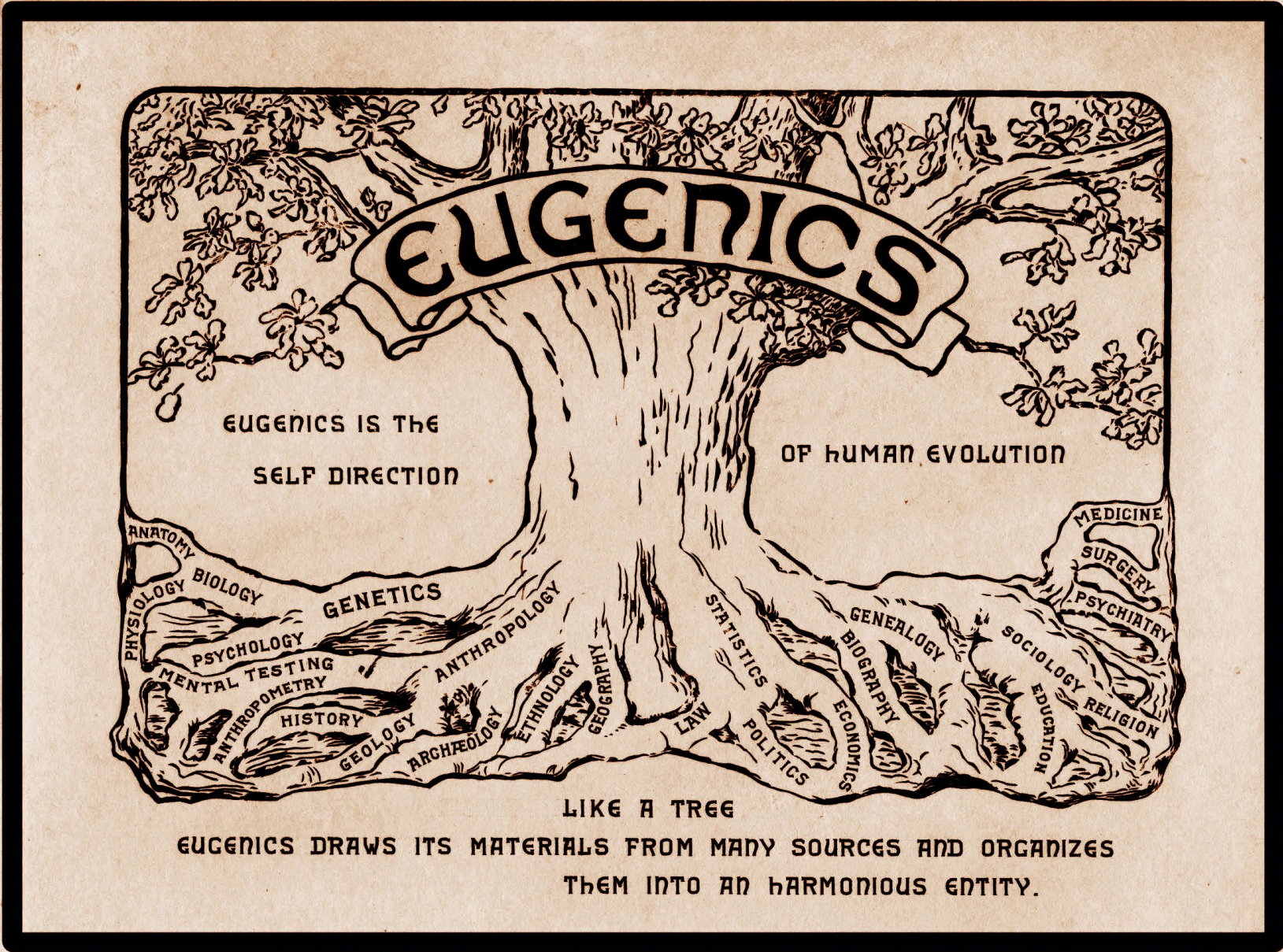
## Health and Housing

- Housing provision was believed to increase population by improving quality of life, limiting the spread of infectious disease and reducing infant mortality rate.
- Healthcare was largely provided for by the church through voluntary hospitals, therefore Catholic medical ethics were a central tenet of medicine.
- Lamarckian eugenics emphasises the importance of environment on human development; for this reason, the Irish Free State sought to improve infant and maternal welfare, education, housing and health with this goal in mind.
- In 1911, 26,000 families lived in Dublin lived in tenement accommodation, which greatly reduced life expectancy (example of tenement above in Fathfull Place, Dublin).
- The Congested Districts Board under Lady Aberdeen sought to improve rural housing on the West coast. This scheme also provided healthcare and improved sanitation.



## Church Involvement

- The Casti Connubii (1930) determined the stance of the Catholic Church on abortion and contraception; emphasising that marriage was for reproduction.
- It also placed emphasis on pronatalism as well as moral purity; it denounced modern dance, cinema and certain publications which mentioned divorce and contraception through censorship.
- Due to the lack of finances available to the government following the civil war, the Church controlled and funded social care such as education, health and religious instruction.
- Catholic lay organisations such as St Luke's Guild, Mary Immaculate College Modest Dress and Deportment Crusade, Catholic Truth Society wrote about their moral vision for society.



## State Legislation

- 1916 Proclamation of Independence 'guarantees equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens', however this was removed from the constitution.
- The state gathered statistics on housing, health and population demographics to improve the health of the Irish 'race'.
- This involved recognising Irish as the official language and endorsing a cultural revival. This is evidenced in numerous planned cultural as well as social projects.
- Catholicism is considered part of nationalism and so is depended on to create the ideal vision of an independent state.
- Carrigan Commission (1930) brought moral degeneracy to light, but its publication was suppressed by the state on the grounds of indecency.
- Special Position of the Catholic Church recognised in the 1937 Constitution (Bunreacht na hEireann)
- The 1937 Constitution enshrined women's place in the home as a mother, highlighting a pronatalist stance.



- All contraceptives, and information about them, were banned.
- 1932 Eucharistic Congress established Ireland as a devout country.



**References:** Images Reproduced Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.  
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Finola Kennedy, "The Suppression of the Carrigan Report: A Historical Perspective on Child Abuse," *An Irish Quarterly Review* 89 (2000), 354-363.  
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