

Book Review

A Whisper Past: Childless after Eugenic Sterilization in Alberta, a memoir by Leilani Muir

Leilani Muir

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Leilani Muir's memoir is the candid story of a brave and remarkable woman who triumphed "against all odds." Her name has become familiar to Canadians over the past decade, since she captured sympathetic attention as the first—and to date, the only—person to successfully sue the Alberta Government for wrongful sterilization. In 1996 the presiding judge on her case ruled in her favour, going so far as to describe the Government's actions as offensive. The trial had relied, in part, on Muir's diary, which she wrote in trying to make sense of her past. In this diary, she recorded information about her life from childhood to the time of the trial. That diary served as an early draft of her memoir. The success of the trial and the recognition that Muir received since that time, through speaking tours, a political campaign, and gratitude from within the local community in Alberta, encouraged her to continue to transform her diary into a memoir. With the help of friends, and editorial guidance from Doug Wahlsten, the book was published bringing her story "up to date."

Muir's story has been documented in many forms of media: she has been a) the focus of a documentary by Glynis Whiting distributed by the National Film Board of Canada, b) interviewed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and other Canadian media, c) the focal point of academic projects, d) the center of theatrical productions, and e) the center of legal records. Although those interpretations reinforce a level of shock at the vicious encounters she had throughout her life, this book differs from those other accounts since it is her life in her own words. Muir portrayed convincingly a past that gives her every right to be outraged, even bitter, but hers is a story of faith and forgiveness.

Muir was born on July 5, 1944 in Calgary, Alberta. The truth about her family is unclear; she lived on several farms with people she believed to be her mother, father (or stepfather), as well as boys that were her brothers and/or cousins. She was the middle child, and the only girl in the family. Muir's account of her early life explains that her mother did not want her, showing this by the abuse she caused her. The gritty details of her life are often troubling, as Muir tells her readers about the starvation, beatings, humiliation, fear, and berating that took place daily. She slept in the farm granary, stole meals from the pig troughs, and was made to kneel in forgiveness on grains of wheat, which cut into her bony knees. She was rarely allowed to go to school and seldom was seen by doctors. Her mother treated her with contempt.

By age 10 or 11 Muir's mother succeeded in having her placed in a home for what at the time

were termed “feeble-minded children,” the Provincial Training School (PTS) for Mental Defectives in Red Deer, Alberta. When she arrived, she was malnourished and scarred. Life in the institution introduced its own challenges and new forms of discipline, but she remembered this place as comparably good: it was warm, there was plenty of food, she played with toys and other girls, and she was encouraged to learn and act like a child. Here she met other children her age and despite the challenges of living in a governmental institution, she thrived.

Though uncommon in Canada, two provinces had a government-authorized eugenics program. British Columbia’s system operated from 1933 until 1973, while the policy in Alberta, Muir’s home province, functioned from 1928 until 1972. At age 14 and a half Muir came before the Alberta Eugenics Board. After an assessment that lasted approximately five minutes, the four-person panel agreed she was likely to pass on a genetic defect of feeble-mindedness to any progeny, and consequently recommended her for sterilization. She was told she was having her appendix removed.

In her 20s, Muir’s mother kidnapped her from Red Deer, threatening to leave her there indefinitely if she did not come to Edmonton with her. For most trainees, as the children were called at the PTS, they left periodically for family visits, but in Muir’s case, going home was not a vacation. Living with her mother in Edmonton, once again Muir suffered abuse at the hands of her mother, eventually escaping with the help of neighbours. She struck out on her own and before long was married. Her first marriage repeated familiar themes from Muir’s life: her husband was a heavy drinker, a jealous man, and an abusive partner. After living under his reign of terror for a year, she fled with the help of friends, but not before realizing through the course of this partnership that she was unable to conceive children.

Later, Muir moved to Victoria, British Columbia, found work, and lived on her own. She married again; this time in a much better relationship, and one that seemed poised to start a family through adoption. But, after being turned down based on her medical history, time spent in an institution, and diagnosis as feeble-minded, in the subcategory of moron, her application was denied. Her marriage soured and eventually ended.

In the 1980s, Muir reached an all-time low in her life. Her second marriage was over, and a gynecologist had concluded that her insides “looked like a slaughter house” and were beyond repair. Her rejected adoption application stung. She learned that one of her older brothers had shot and killed his wife, her mother, and a child. Muir felt responsible for this cascade of horrific events and even considered committing suicide. At that moment, she felt an intervention from God, which came to her through a poem and inspired her to instead use her experiences to sue the government.

The second half of the book splices together bits of the trial documents and testimony with Muir’s intimate memories of her life. She recalled her determination but also her fear and trepidation about once more revealing the details of her life. During the preparation for the trial she also confronted new information, evidence from her PTS file that had been withheld from her through her life, but which revealed further the degree to which her mother had been complicit in the decisions that shaped Muir’s life. But her mother did not act alone; hospital administrators had developed a habit of not closely following the *Sexual Sterilization Act* (1928), instead taking liberties with a group of orphaned, abandoned, or simply isolated institutionalized children. Some of these trainees became subjects of medical experiments, and the rules stipulated by the laws were not uniformly applied. In Muir’s case, presumption of mental deficiency was sufficient to warrant a loosely administered Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test. Her scores were added incorrectly to produce a score low enough that the Alberta Eugenics

Board justified her sexual sterilization. By 1937 the amended *Sexual Sterilization Act* allowed for the Eugenics Board to override the need for consent in specific cases, including for individuals whose IQ scores fell below 70. However, as the trial showed, even for some patients who scored above 70—the cut-off line established by the board for “morons”—the board still recommended sterilization.

The judge ultimately ruled in favour of compensating Muir, and the final section of the book describes her life since the trial. Her brothers took advantage of her generosity, again, spending her compensation funds. But, her confidence also soared from the experiences following the trial. She traveled at the request of scientists who encouraged her to tell her story in her own words, not as an experimental subject or trainee, but as a woman who came to terms with infertility at the hands of the provincial government. She ran for a position as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. She spoke to students about her experiences, and became a regular member of a number of organizations devoted to exposing this history and helping children and adults with disabilities. She transformed from an abused, abandoned child living in an institution, to a leader in the community with the courage to play an important public role in civil society.

Muir’s memoir is not merely tragic, it is empowering. Hers is an autobiography of a survivor. This is a rare account of a woman who survived abuse, survived institutionalization, survived sterilization, survived depression and isolation, and yet somehow mustered the courage to tackle an aggressive program run by the Alberta Government and maintained by a network of players and authorities.

The timing of her publication is significant. For Muir, the bulk of the writing and polishing took place as her fame grew, and as she became known for her leading role in campaigns for social justice. Her confidence is reflected in the writing, which is surprisingly calm and even-handed for a subject so emotionally charged. By bringing the story into the 21st century, the book ends on an empowering note; Muir demonstrated how well she has moved on in her life and how the history of eugenics is receiving much-needed critical attention from scholars, politicians, students, and the Canadian public.

Academically, Muir’s memoir is a poignant reminder of the importance of cultivating the voices of marginalized people. Although there are a number of cruel ironies that compound Leilani’s history, her memoir points also to the plight of others, whether in institutionalized environments or living under the consequences of labels that begin to overwhelm their identities. It is a valuable source for challenging scholars to listen to these voices.

This is not a book that is destined for scholarly critique, nor should it be, since it is a genuine memoir and not an academic account of this history. But scholars should take it seriously, as it presents several important insights. As a historical study, it offers an invaluable perspective on a eugenics program that is often described using numbers and theories. Muir provided instead an emotional, intimate, and powerful account of what those numbers and ideas meant when they played out on a human body. Social scientists, whether in psychology, sociology, education, or political studies, will find the complex interactions of law, institutions, media, and social labeling playing out through Muir’s life in a delicate and frustrating mismatch of ideas, practices, and actions.

As a contribution to education research, this memoir raises a number of complicated issues. The narrative provides insights into life at the Provincial Training School based on Muir’s experiences, illustrating that while the institution provided shelter and security for children, simultaneously it disenfranchised them and imbricated them into a system of marginalization.

The trade-off of shelter for fertility may seem absurd to modern readers, but it raises deeper questions about the quality of education among people with differing needs and abilities. Muir astutely wondered in her memoir where she might be today had she grown up with loving parents and gone to a regular school, or earned at least a more normative education. Her reflections challenge some of the original assumptions of eugenic scientists, and the architects of Sexual Sterilization Act, who reasoned that no amount of education could prepare feebleminded children for full participation in civil society. Muir's story is testimony of the opposite.

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