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Tales of the Tribe of Ishmael

Brian Siegel

Recent publications by Brent Ruswick, Elsa Kramer, and Nathaniel Deutsch¹ suggest that my interest in Indianapolis's Tribe of Ishmael is more widely shared than I had imagined. These scholarly studies, like others before them, build their conclusions upon the evidence left in four different sources of information about the Tribe—in chronological order, the writings of Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch,² a leading advocate of the organized charities movement; James Frank Wright,³ a retired newspaperman and child welfare agent; Arthur H. Estabrook,⁴ a fieldworker for the Eugenics Record Office; and Hugo P. Leaming,⁵ an original revisionist historian. By drawing at various times from one or another of these separate versions of the Ishmaelites' story, and by treating as fact details that do not stand up to independent verification, scholars seeking to understand the Tribe's significance to the development of eugenic thought have at times confused rather than clarified the story. I have studied the Ishmaelites for some time, and hope that my findings might save other

¹ Brent Ruswick, "The Measure of Worthiness: The Rev. Oscar McCulloch and the Pauper Problem, 1877-1891," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 104 (March 2008), 3-35; Elsa F. Kramer, "Recasting the Tribe of Ishmael: The Role of Indianapolis's Nineteenth-Century Poor in Twentieth-Century Eugenics," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 104 (March 2008), 36-64; and Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America's "Worst" Family: Eugenics, Islam, and the Rise and Fall of the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009).

² Oscar C. McCulloch Diaries, November 6, 1877 and January 18, 20, 1878, folders 1 and 2, box 2, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers, Collection L-363, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis (hereafter McCulloch Diaries); McCulloch, "Associated Charities," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference of Charities*, ed. F. B. Sanborn (Boston, 1880), 122-35; McCulloch, "The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study of Social Degradation," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, ed. Isabel C. Barrows (Boston, 1888), 154-59, 406-407.

³ J. Frank Wright, "The Tribe of Ishmael," undated typescript, microfilm IFA-4, Indiana State Archives, Indianapolis.

⁴ Arthur H. Estabrook, "The Tribe of Ishmael," 1922, typescript, box 1, folder 7, Arthur H. Estabrook Papers, 1910-1943, Archives of Public Affairs and Policy, M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York. 2010) © 2010, Trustees of Indiana University.

⁵ Hugo P. Leaming, "The Ben Ishmael Tribe: A Fugitive 'Nation' of the Old Northwest," in *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, eds. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), 98-141, 381-87.

scholars time and energy.

According to his diary, McCulloch discovered the Tribe on January 18, 1878, just ten weeks after he and Rev. Myron Reed had read and preached upon Richard Dugdale's *The Jukes* (1877).⁶ The book became the inspiration for McCulloch's study of the Tribe. McCulloch wrote three accounts of his first encounter with seven desperately poor people--a man, his mother, two younger women, and three children--and each account is slightly different.

The second account, the first public mention of the Tribe, is in McCulloch's 1880 paper to the National Conference of Charities and Correction. The account resembles that found in his diary, but subtle changes have been introduced. The man who had been described as half-blind is no longer so. The second woman, first identified as his wife's sister, is now his sibling, and her child is reported to be the result of incest. McCulloch also altered his diary, reducing one of the women's offspring from four children to two. In the third account, the two younger women's (now) three children switched mothers, and the woman previously identified as the man's sister again became his wife's sibling. These inconsistencies are odd, and one suspects that they were invented, claims-making accounts. The same suspicion arises over McCulloch's ever larger and more alarming counts of the Tribe's numbers.⁷

When McCulloch went to the township trustee, he found the original seven people listed as Ishmaelites, a.k.a. the "pesthouse" mob.⁸ This is quite plausible, because twenty-seven of the thirty addresses given for George Ishmael in the 1874 to 1923 city directories were in the old City Hospital or pesthouse neighborhood,⁹ that is, the Fall Creek bottom- lands below the

⁶ McCulloch Diaries, November 6, 1877; Myron W. Reed, "Tribute to Oscar C. McCulloch," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, ed. Elizabeth C. Barrows (Boston, 1902), 248.

⁷ Stephen Ray Hall, "Oscar McCulloch and Indiana Eugenics" (Ph.D. diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1993), 129-30; Nicole Hahn Rafter, "Claims-Making and Socio-cultural Context in the First U.S. Eugenics Campaign," *Social Problems*, 39 (February 1992), 17-34.

⁸ McCulloch Diaries, January 20, 1878.

⁹ B. R. Sulgrove, *History of Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1884), 141; William N. Wishard, "The Early Days of the Flower Mission [Nurses] Training School," *Journal of the Indiana State Medical Association*, 27 no. 1 (1934), 21-25;

1910s landfill that lies underneath the current IUPUI medical campus. The census records and city directories document the occupational shifts of the illiterate family members from ash- and swill- collecting laborers and teamsters to junk dealers by 1910. However, as Nathaniel Deutsch demonstrates, McCulloch's history of the Ishmael family is largely fictitious.

In the pages of the *IMH*, Brent Ruswick asserts that McCulloch's attitude toward the Tribe softened over time, and that while he began with hereditarian remedies for their pauperism, he eventually shifted to environmental ones. Yet, unlike Dugdale, McCulloch never pondered the relative importance of hereditary versus environmental determinants of the Ishmaelites' pauperism.¹⁰ It was, after all, a family trait. At a time when even biologists were Lamarckians,¹¹ it was common for social reformers such as McCulloch "to confuse social and physical heredity, and to assume the physical inheritance of complex cultural characteristics."¹² McCulloch went on to father the Center Township Board of Children's Guardians and the State Board of Charities, but his disciples--Alexander Johnson, Ernest P. Bicknell, and Amos W. Butler (the first three secretaries of the State Board of Charities)--became professed eugenicists and supported the state's 1907 eugenic sterilization law.

While elements of McCulloch's history suggest a drift away from biological determinism, he also believed that children had to be removed from their families to escape hereditary pauperism. And his 1891 presidential

Thurman B. Rice, "The Changing Face of the Campus Site," *Monthly Bulletin of the Indiana State Board of Health*, 50 no. 3 (1947), 61-64; Rice, "The Origin and Development of the City Hospital," *Monthly Bulletin of the Indiana State Board of Health*, 50 no. 4 (1947), 91-96; Rice, "The Development of the Grounds," *Monthly Bulletin of the Indiana State Board of Health*, 51 no. 11 (1948), 261-65; Rice, "The 'Tribe of Ishmael' Study," *Monthly Bulletin of the Indiana State Board of Health*, 55 no. 10 (1952), 233-37.

¹⁰ Richard L. Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (1877; New York, 1910), 66; Elof Axel Carlson, "R. L. Dugdale and the Jukes Family: An Historical Injustice Corrected," *BioScience*, 30 (August 1980), 535-39.

¹¹ E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (London, 1880); David Starr Jordan, *The Heredity of Richard Roe: A Discussion of the Principles of Eugenics* (Boston, 1911), 23-25.

¹² George W. Stocking, Jr., "Lamarckianism in American Social Science, 1890-1915," in *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, ed. Stocking (New York, 1968), 246, 251.

address to the National Conference of Charities and Correction advocated the creation of a national registry of the dependent, defective, and delinquent classes.¹³ His attitude toward the Tribe was fundamentally ambivalent.

When I arrived at the Indiana State Library in early 2003, Robert Horton's articles had already convinced me that the Tribe of Ishmael, McCulloch's intermarried "pauper ganglion," was a hoax.¹⁴ I shared this conviction with a librarian, and was then shown the 1822 probated record of Benjamin Ishmael's 1813 will,¹⁵ which lists most of the same children as J. Frank Wright's manuscript on the Tribe. I turned to the city directories and census records, and found the historical Ishmaels of Indianapolis.

Much of what we think we know about the Ishmaelites derives from Wright's unpublished manuscript and its seductive, anecdotal accounts of the seamy side of life. Kramer and Deutsch, in particular, have depended upon the Wright manuscript as a basis for their own interpretations.¹⁶ Wright's account, however, is problematic as a primary source. He had prepared it for Arthur H. Estabrook, who then left it with Amos Butler before leaving Indianapolis. Yet just like the names on Wright and Kate Parker's genealogical diagram of the Tribe for McCulloch's 1888 paper,¹⁷ the characters in his manuscript are probably fictitious. Robert Horton, while still at the Indiana State Archives, discovered that the real Robert Ross was not Wright's diseased dodger who seduced his daughters and made them prostitutes, but the worthiest charity applicant known to his physician and employer.¹⁸

¹³ Hall, "Oscar McCulloch and Indiana Eugenics," 181, 160, 163.

¹⁴ Robert Horton, "Call Them Ishmael: Stories About the Poor in Indianapolis," unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author; Horton, "Tribe of Ishmael," in *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, eds. David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 1341-42.

¹⁵ Annie Walker Burns, *Record of Wills in Nicholas County, Kentucky* (Salt Pleasant, Md., 1936), 17.

¹⁶ Kramer, "Recasting the Tribe of Ishmael," 43-54; Deutsch, *Inventing America's "Worst" Family*, 72-101.

¹⁷ Hall, "Oscar McCulloch and Indiana Eugenics," 129-30.

¹⁸ Horton, "Call Them Ishmael" and "Tribe of Ishmael."

Still other examples of Wright's fictitious characters are Hiram and Melinda Rogers and their family. Wright claimed that the Rogers were early settlers of Marion County, and that their sons were ruined for civilian life by the Army's paternalistic care.¹⁹ Yet the 1860 census reveals that the real Hiram and Melinda were twelve-year-old twins on their parents' farm, and that two of their alleged sons were their six- and eight-year-old brothers. Wright's manuscript contains the names of real people, but assigns them fictitious histories, dates, and states of origin. There is an entirely appropriate sense of irony in Dr. Thurman B. Rice's judgment that "Many of the statements made by Mr. Wright are amazing beyond belief."²⁰

It should be noted that the final pages of Wright's notes for Estabrook include a pointed critique of eugenics theory, which begins: "Physical and mental conditions are inheritable conditions; morals are no more a matter of inheritance than shoes."²¹ Wright (1851-1927) almost certainly knew his contemporary, George Ishmael (1849/50-1926). They may have met in 1881, when the city directory listed Wright as the proprietor of a feed and seed store at 178 Indiana Avenue, adjoining the City Hospital neighborhood. Whatever the case, the "notorious wandering family, well named Ishmael" had already appeared in the 1902 and 1911 published summaries of Wright's work on the early slums of Indianapolis.²²

Wright evidently joined Estabrook's study of the Tribe in 1916 at age sixty-five. The city directory for that year listed Estabrook as an "inspector" and Wright as an "investigator." Wright's obituary says that his health had failed while an agent for the Carolina child welfare boards, and forced his return to Indianapolis.²³ Estabrook was pursuing several projects. He probably welcomed assistance from one who had assembled the Tribe's genealogical diagram, and the compensation Wright received from his

¹⁹ Wright, "The Tribe of Ishmael," nos. 135-40.

²⁰ Rice, "The 'Tribe of Ishmael' Study," 233-37.

²¹ Wright, "The Tribe of Ishmael," Owens family.

²² Anonymous, "Slums of Indianapolis," *Indianapolis Journal*, January 12, 1902, p. 8; George S. Cottman, "Old-Time Slums of Indianapolis," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 7 (December 1911), 170-73. These two articles are identical, and both identify Mr. J. F. Wright as the source. Compare either of these with the unattributed "The Devil's Own," *Indianapolis News*, January 19, 1884, p. 4, which Estabrook's manuscript (p. 149) implies was written by his assistant, James Frank Wright.

²³ "James F. Wright Rites Tomorrow," *Indianapolis Star*, July 31, 1927, pt. 2, p. 22.

typewritten sketches must have helped make ends meet. The directories list no occupation for Wright from 1917-18, when Estabrook was away in the Army. Wright was a watchman from 1919-20, and an elevator operator from 1921 until his death in 1927.

Estabrook, the author of two earlier studies of cacogenic families,²⁴ came to Indianapolis in 1916 as an agent of Amos W. Butler's Society for Mental Hygiene to assess the size of the state's mentally defective population.²⁵ In addition, Charles B. Davenport, director of the Eugenics Record Office, wanted Estabrook to resurrect the study of the Tribe of Ishmael, and Harry L. Laughlin, in 1921, asked him to investigate a possible test case for a new state eugenic sterilization law.²⁶

Rather than being, as some have suggested, a second, independent sociological study of the Tribe of Ishmael, Estabrook's unpublished 1922 work draws freely from Wright's manuscript, and Estabrook acknowledges the assistance. In fact, nine (60 percent) of Estabrook's fifteen families are obvious rewrites of Wright's sketches. Apart from a stress upon feeble-mindedness and attention to the Tribe's occupations and the Ishmael family's junk business, there is little new material of any kind. But there is, as Kramer notes, a distinct shift in tone. Estabrook's descriptions are less outrageous than Wright's. Not surprisingly, however, the eugenical fieldworker found a rate of feeble-mindedness three times higher--16 percent versus 5 percent--than Wright suggests, and he did so without actually testing any of his subjects.

It was Estabrook's army service that allowed him to perform his behavioral assessments of the Ishmaelites' intelligence. Estabrook's time in Indianapolis was interrupted by World War I and his service at Camp

²⁴ Arthur H. Estabrook and Charles B. Davenport, *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics* (Cold Spring Harbor, N. Y., 1912); Arthur H. Estabrook, *The Jukes in 1915* (Washington, D.C., 1916).

²⁵ "Some Facts about Mental Defectives and Mental Disease in Indiana," typewritten press release, ca. November 28, 1933, folder B, item 9, Indiana Society for Mental Hygiene, 1915-1941, Manuscripts Collection L-205, Indiana State Library; Rice, "The 'Tribe of Ishmael' Study," 237.

²⁶ Arthur H. Estabrook, "Warren Wallace Smith, the Subject of the Test Case of the Indiana Sterilization Law," February 1, 1922, typescript, Manuscript Collection S-434, Indiana State Library; Harry H. Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* (Chicago, 1922), 313-18.

Gordon, Georgia, as a psychological officer with the Robert M. Yerkes Army Sanitary Corps. From April to September 1918 he helped identify feebleminded inductees by administering the celebrated Army Intelligence Tests; thereafter he was engaged in “advising and lecturing to officers on methods of [troop] training.”²⁷ In doing so, he must have utilized Yerkes’s new scale of occupational intelligence grades. Engineer officers were assigned an A level (very superior) intelligence, whereas laborers or teamsters (like the Ishmael family men) received a C minus level, indicating low average intelligence.²⁸ Estabrook employed the same scale to study the Tribe, based solely on members’ reported behavior.

Estabrook’s study of the Tribe was never published. Harry L. Laughlin had replaced Charles B. Davenport as head of the Eugenics Record Office in 1921. Davenport had been interested in cacogenic families and the Tribe of Ishmael, but Laughlin was interested in more practical issues such as eugenic sterilization, racial integrity laws, and immigration restriction. Thus Estabrook left Indianapolis in 1922 to assemble evidence for the sterilization of Carrie Buck, and to defend Virginia’s racial purity law with his expose of the Monacan Indians’ tri-racial ancestry, *Mongrel Virginians* (co-authored with Ivan McDougle in 1926).²⁹

The last of the four tales is Hugo P. Leaming’s Tribe of Ben Ishmael. Like

²⁷ Arthur H. Estabrook, “Mental Defectives in Rural Communities,” *Indiana Bulletin of Charities and Correction*, 113 (1918), 247-48; Robert M. Yerkes, ed., *Psychological Examining in the United States Army* (Washington, D.C., 1921), 32, 35-38, 75, 81, 115; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 192-233; Daniel J. Kevles, “Testing the Army’s Intelligence: Psychologists and the Military in World War I,” *Journal of American History*, 55 (December 1968), 565-81.

²⁸ Robert M. Yerkes, “What Psychology Contributed to the War,” in *The New World of Science: Its Development during the War*, ed. Yerkes (1920; Freeport, N.Y., 1969), 364-72, 378; Brian Siegel, “Estabrook’s Tribe of Ishmael Manuscript,” unpublished paper, 13.

²⁹ Alan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism* (New York, 1977), 313-16; Stephen Jay Gould, “Carrie Buck’s Daughter,” *Natural History*, 93 (July 1984), 14-18; John David Smith, *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and Legacy of the Kallikaks* (Rockville, Md., 1985), 139-53; Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan E. McDougle, *Mongrel Virginians: The Win [White-Indian-Negro]Tribe* (Baltimore, Md., 1926); W. A. Plecker, “Virginia’s Effort to Preserve Racial Integrity,” in *A Decade of Progress in Eugenics: Scientific Papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics* (Baltimore, Md., 1934), 105-12; Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas’ People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (Norman, Okla., 1990), 219-42.

his posthumously published dissertation, Leaming's 1977 paper found it "necessary to extrapolate a good deal from little evidence."³⁰

Leaming's Ishmaelites, who allegedly settled the White River valley in the early 1800s, were a freedom-loving band of hereditarily nomadic, Muslim hunter-fishers who refused to seek wage labor slavery, and so were persecuted by McCulloch's charities and the eugenicists who followed. Leaming's Tribe then migrated to Chicago and Detroit, where they helped form Timothy Drew's Moorish Science Temple, a predecessor of the Nation of Islam.

There is no evidence for these claims, other than the fact that three of George Ishmael's cousins moved to Marion, Indiana, by 1910. The census records repeatedly classified the real Ishmaels as illiterate whites, and suggest that they were still in Nicholas County, Kentucky, when Indianapolis was founded. No one like Leaming's Ishmaelites, whom he described as a mixed race people including "remnants of destroyed Native Americans," appears in books about the Delaware or Miami Indians, or the Conner brothers. While some would say this lack of evidence suggests that these Ishmaelites did not exist, Leaming attributes it to "mass social amnesia."³¹

Leaming's brand of revisionist history walks a fine line between outright fiction and a parody of the eugenics literature. It is also oddly personal, for one of his admirers tells of this white Unitarian Virginian's 1989 address to his African American congregation in Chicago: "Proudly wearing the fez of the Moorish Science Temple, he stood before us, a pale-skinned man of 'tri-racial' Chickahominy Indian stock, and delivered his moving sermon, 'My African Ancestry.'"³²

In sum, the trash-collecting and junk-dealing Ishmael family did exist; the intermarried pauper ganglion called the Tribe of Ishmael did not; and the tales told about either of them by McCulloch, Wright, Estabrook, and Leaming are not to be trusted. These tales tell us more about social history and shifting intellectual fashions than their largely fictitious subjects.

³⁰ Peter C. Stewart, review of *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas*, by Hugo Prosper Leaming, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (July 1996), 666-67; Leaming, "The Ben Ishmael Tribe," 102.

³¹ Leaming, "The Ben Ishmael Tribe," 9, 386 n88.

³² James Koehnline, "Dedication" in *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Dropout Culture*, eds. Ron Sakolsky and James Koehnline (Brooklyn, N. Y., 1993), 9.