



**University  
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

**PAIGE FEHR**

BA (Vancouver Island University, 2015)

**“Psychiatry and Eugenics: The Classification and Diagnosis of Female  
Patients in British Columbia’s Psychiatric Institutions, 1918-1933”**

Department of History

August 17, 2017

1:00 P.M.

David Turpin Building

Room A144

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Lynne Marks, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Annalee Lepp, Department of Gender Studies, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Mary-Ellen Kelm, Department of History, Simon Fraser University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Leighton, Department of English, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

## **Abstract**

Between 1918 and 1933 the eugenic notion of “defective heredity” was central to psychiatric practice in British Columbia. Public and medical professionals’ concerns were heightened by an apparent increase in “insane” and “mentally deficient” individuals in the province. Using the annual reports for the asylums and the case files of women who were admitted to the Public Hospital for the Insane and to Essondale between 1918 and 1933, this thesis examines the relationship between psychiatric practice and eugenics, specifically how eugenically-minded asylum physicians classified and diagnosed female patients. Asylum physicians used admissions forms, patient interviews, observation, and inference to make diagnoses. Often, despite a lack of evidence, they concluded that patients had inherited a predisposition to mental disease. Women admitted to B.C.’s Public Hospital for the Insane and to Essondale were more likely than their male counterparts to have their mental condition linked to heredity. Any “eccentric” or “abnormal” behaviour or personality in the patient or their family was considered by asylum physicians to be evidence of a predisposition to mental disorder. Within the population of female asylum patients, racialized women were the most likely to be labeled as having “defective heredity.” Widespread racial discrimination in the province, combined with the fact that eugenic discourse targeted non-white citizens as being biologically and culturally inferior, shaped and influenced the asylum physicians’ classification and diagnoses of mental illness among racialized women. The experiences of these women during their incarceration were also shaped by racialized discourse and their behaviour was negatively stereotyped by asylum staff.