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RACE BIAS IN SOCIAL STUDIES

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This is the second article in the series by Mr. Spalding. After reading it, most teachers will feel the need to scrutinize carefully the books currently in use in their classrooms.

In the next issue, Mr. Spalding will write about the transmission and reinforcement of prejudice.

Attitudes of racial superiority have flourished in Australia since they were imported from Britain and elsewhere. These attitudes manifest themselves in many ways. They are certainly embodied in a good deal of school text and reference material dealing with Aboriginal affairs.

When we examine material concerning Aborigines which has been used for social studies in Australian schools over the years, derogatory patterns begin to emerge. In a previous article about Australia's racist heritage several time-honoured usages conveying derogatory attitudes towards Aboriginal people were mentioned - the century old tendency to rank Aborigines low on an imagined "scale of humanity", and the terms "savage", "primitive" and "the natives".

Listed below without comment are a number of extracts from social studies material covering a span of seventy years. Some of the quotations and some of the sources from which they have been taken will be familiar to former students and to teachers. Evidence of this kind raises the whole question of what has been taught about Aboriginal people in the past, what is being taught, and what should be taught or learned in classrooms and resource centres across the country. Many of the sentiments expressed seem to do less than justice to Aboriginal people and society in one way or another. Some references are clearly misleading and inaccurate, and insulting as well. Many subtleties of communication are involved, no doubt, but a good deal of suspicion falls upon particular terms and mannerisms in presentation which appear time and again.

In a full examination of modes of expression, account would be taken of the context in which any word, sentence or passage was placed. This is not attempted here. Attention is simply drawn to examples of modes of expression used with reference to Aborigines. They might be seen as characteristic, even ordinary or normal, uses of language. There is no doubt that if common forms of expression could be identified, the way would be open to a closer examination of the wider question of bias and its perpetuation. Steps should be taken towards analysing communication processes which transmit ideas that are self-deluding or inadequate or which knowingly or unknowingly give offence to Aboriginal people.

Although one book may say rather more than another it is not suggested that the particular titles from which the selections have been taken deserve special blame. They are convenient examples of what appear to be common practices.

A change is occurring, on the evidence of the material produced in the last four or five years. For one reason or another social studies books do not follow to the same degree those all-too familiar ways of dealing with Aboriginal topics. Greater difficulty is now experienced in finding examples of the traditional stereotypes and well-established expressions of superiority and disdain. Perhaps publishers today are more sensitive and imaginative when it comes to Aboriginal issues. New teaching approaches being adopted in the social sciences may be reducing the demand, and thus the supply, of those materials which attempt to encapsulate knowledge on a thousand topics, Aborigines included. But if some of the blatant usages are vanishing, much of the material available on Aborigines is obviously inadequate. Biases remain; but their identification seems to demand more sophisticated assessment than was required previously.

The earlier examples listed here are of English origin. In some cases the precise publication dates are not known. No one would want to suggest that the parent books are of equal significance in classroom terms. While some have seen widespread use others are of minor importance. The question to ask in each case is "Could this be confidently passed on to my pupils, black or white?" The occasional word has been italicized for emphasis.

The first particularly outrageous selection comes from an unlikely publication dating from the end of the nineteenth century, or the early years of this century. It is descriptively entitled *Strange Races in Strange Lands*.

"An Australian Corroborree.

This picture shows us a 'Corroborree', a dance of the Aborigines, or original inhabitants of Australia. These natives are very degraded and ignorant, more like monkeys than men and women. There are still a good many in the north of Australia, but few are left in the Southern Provinces, such as New South Wales or Victoria.

These 'Blackfellows', as they are called, are very hideous, with dirty skins, frizzy hair and very ugly faces. The females are galled 'Gins'. They speak a very queer language, partly English and partly native words.

The Blackfellow's idea of happiness is to eat all day and to dance all night round a camp-fire, as you see in the picture. They are delighted when a British 'squatter' or farmer will give them a whole dead sheep and they tear it up and eat it nearly raw!

The wild Blackfellows live upon game, which they kill with their wonderful native weapons, called boomerangs... Some men are holding boomerangs at the back of the picture; they are curved sticks and a native can throw one in such a way that it will strike and kill a kangaroo, or some other animal, and then return, flying through the air, and fall at the feet of the Blackfellow who threw it.

When the Blackfellows cannot get game, they will live on the leaves of trees, or on fat, white grubs, which they find under the bark of gum trees.

Aborigines get terribly excited over their Corroborrees. In these dances they imitate beasts and birds, and in the picture they are pretending to be emus, which are huge birds rather like ostriches.

You can just imagine what a hideous noise they are making as they hop round."

(1)

1904 From an old Geography Reader:

"The original inhabitants of Australia, or 'blackfellows', as the settlers call them, have dwindled greatly in numbers since the arrival of Europeans ... They are fast disappearing before the onward march of the white man..."

"... and he is for ever moving on to fresh woods and pastures new."

"The blackfellows form one of the lowest races of mankind in existence ..."

"The women, or 'gins', are considered by their husbands as mere beasts of burden. They are so badly treated that a native woman is usually a mass of scars, and seldom lives beyond the age of thirty."

"Their food is very varied, and they will eat almost any living thing, even lizards and snakes."

"Hunting and warfare keep the blackfellow busy..."

"On certain occasions the men, in all the glory of paint, grease, and feathers, meet together in what are called corobbories, and dance round huge fires; while the women sing low, monotonous songs and beat drums of opossum skin. It is probable that these dances are in some way connected with their hazy and primitive religion."

(2)

1927 From a geographical story book for juniors found in a primary school library in Western Australia in 1969:

"'I was just beginning to wonder whether I would see any people' said Dorrie, 'when through the trees came two children, a girl and a boy. Oh, Dick, they were very, very ugly! Their faces were the colour of soot and their noses were flat. They were both quite naked.'"

"When the white men first came to Australia there were a great many blacks in the land. The white men soon found they could not trust the blacks, who made sudden attacks on settlers at lonely places. Today, however, there are but a few blacks, and those who remain are dying out rapidly." (3)

1953 Over 200,000 copies of this British book for primary schools across the Empire were produced over two decades. My copy was removed from a Victorian primary school library some five years ago:

"...perhaps you would like to know about the natives.

The picture shows you that they are rather ugly, have dark skins, and wear very few clothes. And they are not very clever, for they do not know how to grow food, or how to look after animals, or how to build good houses."

"The black men of Australia live a very simple life. When they rest at any place, they live in small, round huts made from twigs, grass, and mud.

Most of them draw pictures on their bodies by cutting themselves with sharp knives. At certain times of the year they paint themselves with great splashes of white, red, and yellow. When painted like this, they get very excited, and do many strange dances.

I should not like to be the child of one of these people. Would you?" (4)

1955 A reference book widely used in post-war years:

"When an Aborigine stands upright he looks nearly as straight as one of his own spears, so straight is his back, so lean and thin his legs and arms. This is one of the characteristics of his race, and, together with the chocolate colour of his skin, is the first thing people seem to notice about him."

"It means that the Aborigines are people who have no settled village life ...

... but prefer to move from place to place, making any little shelter do for a house, and eating whatever they find in the bush."

They eat snakes and lizards also, and enjoy them very much, especially the larger ones; you see, almost every living thing in the bush is eaten by the Aborigines."

"What do the Aborigines drink? As a rule *only* water."

"Aboriginal tribes have *no* kings or chiefs." (5)

1958 "...they wander about hunting."

"They eat animals, grubs, fruit, fish anything."

"In the middle and north of Australia live natives or Aborigines who eat white ants." (6)

1961 From a small book for younger primary children:

"The aborigines liked to eat fish and wild birds, but when these were hard to find they ate things like lizards, snakes and grasshoppers ..."

"Schools have been built where little children can learn to do the same things that the white children do. They learn to read and write, to sing songs, and play the games they like, for they love playing games.

One of the lessons they like best is drawing, and some of the boys and girls are quite clever at this. They like to use bright colors and they like to paint bright things.

These dark-skinned people need our help and care. When they smile at us, showing their lovely white teeth, they want to be friendly, and we must always try to make them happy in this land which once belonged to them." (7)

1965 And from a popular junior secondary reference series of fairly recent vintage:

"Once, in Alice Springs, Doug had been to the cinema, and he'd never forgotten the American film about cowboys and the strange red Indians who were fierce and terrifying, not at all like the gentle, smiling aborigines. Of course he knew that in the past the aborigines had been wild and uncivilized. They had gone about quite naked living in the bush with only stone implements and wooden boomerangs as weapons, eating insects and raw meat, and making war amongst the tribes. They were wanderers, the aborigines. Even now a couple of ringers were likely to disappear from the station, going walkabout, as they called taking off on a journey of weeks or months." (8)

1966 A selection from a recently retired publication produced by the Queensland Department of Education:

"The forest and soil meant but little to Kooloona ...
... The thought had never entered his mind that he might grow plants or make cloth of their fibres to yield him clothing." (9)

1967 This is the one reference to Aborigines in a European book about white Australia:

"He (Don) wonders, too, as he gazes at the great rolling plains stretching away to the blue hills, about the country long before the settlers came with their sheep and cattle. Then there were only a few tribes of wandering aborigines, kangaroos and Australia's wild dogs, the dingoes." (10)

In the junior history and social studies books, particularly the primary school books which flooded classrooms through the 1960's, the manner of treating the *discovery* and settlement of Australia inescapably conveys information and attitudes concerning the Aboriginal people. This important topic is a subject on its own. However, it may be appropriate to include several examples in the context of Social Studies:

"Here is a little play to act before the class.
Characters: Bass, Flinders, Natives.

Flinders: Well, we're ashore safely, but I don't like the look of these natives". etc ...

"As a rule the natives were timid and kept out of sight, but here, perhaps because they wanted to get water from the spring, they suddenly attacked. It was lucky that the explorers were on the alert, and a quick volley from their rifles sent the natives scurrying into the bush." (11)

And then, with a rather contorted logic:

"Have you ever thought how lucky we are to be able to live in our own country in peace; the history of the world tells many stories of countries over run by strangers, of people killed or enslaved or driven away from the best areas? This is what happened to the aborigines in Australia." (12)

1968 "And on this lonely continent for thousands of years lived three different races of people. When the fourth invader - the white man - came, he thought of them as just another race of primitive savages and called them Australian Aborigines."

"Little lizards and *even* snakes are much sought after delicacies." (13)

"Like many Aborigines Graham loves to draw and use coloured crayons."

"By the time they reached some gum trees Graham was hungry. The two boys found a few witchety grubs and ate them raw.

'And now I'm thirsty again', said Graham. He scooped a hole in the sand and found water. All Aborigines can find water if they need it." (14)

"The tragedy of the aboriginal is that of any primitive people faced with a higher civilization. The breaking down of the tribal structure of their society leaves these people in a kind of vacuum, between two worlds, and unless we make greater efforts to help them, they will soon disappear." (15)

1970 For secondary students:

"Over the 25,000 years during which the Australian natives occupied our land before the coming of the white man, they never advanced beyond the stone age or hunting stage of development." (16)

And for junior primaries:

"People who live together in tribes like the early Aborigines are called PRIMITIVE people." (17)

1971 Then from two well used books, the first junior secondary, the second upper primary:

"Like the Stone-age man, the Aborigine loved to draw the things around him, using the materials he could find near at hand."

"As white settlers *moved further inland* they pushed the Aborigines into the drier areas ..." (18)

"With the coming of the 'white' man they were often forced to *migrate further inland*, which is why today the only true Aborigines are found mainly away from the settled areas." (19)

1972 This concluding quotation is taken from a recent publication on the frontier where Social Studies and English meet:

"Australia cannot be proud of her record so far in the treatment of her aboriginal people. They have been pushed out on to land nobody wants ..." (20)

Some readers will agree with the criticisms implied in drawing attention to each of these quotations from social studies sources. In other cases there may not be ready agreement with the suggestion that a particular passage, or what it represents, is biased or inadequate in its treatment of the Aboriginal issues. Be that as it may there is no doubt that questions about the transmission and reinforcement of racial biases in Australia deserve a good deal of attention.

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Editorial Note: Evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme.

Many of you will know that I have been asked by the Commonwealth Department of Education to undertake a national evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme. This research will be conducted during 1974.

Research teams will be visiting schools throughout Australia to make a detailed study of approximately one thousand students who are in receipt of the Grant.
