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BOOK REVIEW - *Black Australia, An Annotated Bibliography and Teacher's Guide to Resources on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*. Annotated, compiled and edited by Marji Hill and Alex Barlow. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. Humanities Press Inc., New Jersey, U.S.A., 1978.

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It would be difficult not to be over-enthusiastic about the publication of this annotated bibliography of resources dealing with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The general ignorance of white Australians regarding black Australians is widely known and widely lamented, and many educationalists from the primary to the tertiary level have initiated programs in Aboriginal studies. Too often, however, the devisors of these programs are as ignorant as their students (though perhaps in different ways) and they end up perpetuating rather than eliminating this ignorance. I must confess that I am myself guilty on this count. I have spent over three years teaching Aboriginal and Islander students so I should be expected to know better, yet as a secondary school librarian and teacher, I have ordered and/or used books by C.P. Mountford, A.W. Reed, Ion Idriess and Douglas Lockwood -- all of which are of dubious value, according to this bibliography. The Reed and Lockwood books were recommended in a secondary social science journal for courses in Aboriginal studies.

The presentation in *Black Australia* is admirable. The compilers realize that a major feature of racial prejudice is the fact that one is usually unaware that one's attitudes are biased. Hill and Barlow introduce their work with a few essays which take the time to patiently explain what 'prejudice' and 'racism' are, how they manifest themselves and how they ultimately defeat understanding. There is an equally patient explanation of what thorough, objective scholarship is. This eloquent contrast lays the ground work for the specific textual criticisms that follow. The books, films and other resources reviewed are divided up into broad subject categories (e.g. General Treatments, Prehistory, Oral Traditions, Contemporary Issues). Each section is preceded by an essay which briefly outlines the present state of knowledge in that area.

It would be useful here to describe some of the recurrent flaws which Hill and Barlow have found in resources dealing with Aborigines and Islanders.

SHODDY SCHOLARSHIP

The extent of inadequate research and hasty conclusion detailed in this volume is appalling. Evidently the field is fairly over-run by popular anthropologists ready and willing to offer neat and simple interpretations of highly varied and complex phenomena. The harm done by these superficial analyses is often underestimated. It is impossible to understand or evaluate Aboriginal culture without an appreciation of its dynamism. Popular anthropologists tend to leave their readers with the impression that Aboriginal culture is static, homogeneous and intellectually and spiritually primitive.

Another example of poor scholarly practice is the widespread failure of writers to specify context in retelling Aboriginal myths. There is a general tendency to treat Aboriginal oral traditions as children's tales and, indeed, a myth divorced from its environmental and cultural setting reads like a simple fairy-tale. Put in proper perspective, however, it may be seen to be the subtle expression of Aboriginal ideology that it really is.

Surely there is no field of research where failure to cite sources is excusable practice. Yet it is routine for authors in this field to retell myths and legends without giving any credit to the original story-teller. This is part of an unconscious racist propensity to deal with individual Aborigines not as individuals but as representatives of a group. Photographic captions in typical popular works about Aborigines rarely describe the subject as anyone more specific than "an Aboriginal".

In addition to researchers who are inept, there are those who are unscrupulous. Some texts have included information and pictures which violate the "secret-sacredness" of traditional Aboriginal rites. We can hardly expect a researcher to be honest with us if he has demonstrated that he has no respect for others.

STEREOTYPING

Sweeping generalizations have a fatal attraction for white Australian writers about black Australians. Often these generalizations are formulated in advance (being the basis rather than the result of the author's observation). Hill and Barlow suggest

that authors forebear generalization and come to grips with individual people and specific situations. How refreshing that would be!

ETHNOCENTRISM

Extreme ethnocentrism, in which the Aboriginal people and their culture are depicted as undeniably inferior, is, or course, evil. But it has the advantage of being extremely easy to recognize and (intellectually, at least) refute. Additionally, its derogatory style and often obscene language are noxious to all decent people, no matter what their knowledge or ignorance of Aborigines.

There is a more subtle ethnocentrism, however, which infects many books in this field. It is always difficult for someone to escape the influences which have made them what they are. Very few books about Aborigines are written by Aborigines. It is understandable then, if no less regrettable, that many extremely well-intentioned white Australian authors are unable to evaluate things except in the light of their own cultural backgrounds and preferences. The inevitable result of this bias is an endorsement (stated or unstated) of the policy of assimilation. The danger for us as readers is that, as white Australians ourselves, we will not see that the attractiveness of assimilation is largely narcissistic.

DISCREDITED AND OUTDATED THEORIES, CONCEPTS AND TERMS

As this bibliography states, "tremendous advances have been made over the last decade in our knowledge of Aboriginal origins, languages, religion, relationship to the land, life styles and so on." Outdated information leads to erroneous conclusions. Caution must be exercised in utilizing resources which do not take adequate account of recent studies.

Another annoying feature of some texts is the use of inappropriate terminology. Some writers evidently believe that there exists a finite set of anthropological descriptive terms and that in describing a phenomenon one must settle for the term that comes the closest. Thus we often read of Aboriginal "chiefs", "shaman", and "tribes" - terms that need quite a bit of redefining before they can accurately reflect the Aboriginal reality.

ROMANTICISM

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are flesh and blood people. In attempting to counterbalance the impact of derogatory

accounts of Aboriginal life, some authors have fallen into the reverse trap of idealizing it. Though this perhaps serves a short term purpose, ultimately it is a grave disservice.

EXOTIC EMPHASIS

A number of writers' interest in the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is confined to those aspects of their history and culture which seem rather lurid to the average white Australian. There's no doubt that accounts of headhunting, religious beliefs, sexual practices and the like are fascinating stuff; the problem is that these accounts, in isolation, obscure the facts that we are all human beings, and that in a number of important ways, Aborigines and Islanders are rather more like us than unlike us.

PIECEMEAL TREATMENTS

A final danger, which will have particular relevance for secondary school teachers, lies in the practice of studying isolated "thematic" aspects of Aboriginal life. Hill and Barlow offer the following example:

In Home Science, for instance, the range of Aboriginal food and methods of preparation, may be studied in a cross-cultural context, as part of a study of diet and nutrition. But it would be very wrong to isolate one aspect of Aboriginal life in this way since as in this instance, a study of diet and nutrition must surely raise many questions related to techniques of hunting and gathering, the relationship between Aborigines and their environment, ownership and management of resources, methods of conservation and increase, division of labour and technology -- to name but a few. Ideally such specific themes should form part of a total, interdisciplinary study of Aboriginal cultures and lifestyles. Resource material which uses this fragmented approach to Aboriginal cultures needs to be perused very carefully both for the things it says and also for what it does not but certainly should say about these and related aspects of culture.

In checking through this bibliography for possible gaps, I was quite impressed by the amount and range of material included; nevertheless, as the compilers readily admit, there is no such thing as a complete bibliography. A number of books have been published since this collection was completed. Some recent works

that should be included in future editions are: The Aboriginal Arts Board's *Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*; Duke and Sommerlad's *Design for Diversity: Further Education for Tribal Aborigines in the North*; *Language Problems and Aboriginal Education*, edited by Brumby and Vaszolyi; *This is Palm Island*, by Bill Rosser, and *The World Catalogue of Theses and Dissertations about the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, compiled by W.C. Coppel. Comalco Ltd's booklet, *Aborigines and Islanders at Weipa* is worth studying in conjunction with the books in the *Mapoon Story* series (which are reviewed).

There are also some older works which have been omitted. I should think that the six volume *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait* ought to have been included (although it was probably considered and excluded on the grounds that it is quite old and not "readily available"). *The Torres Strait Border Issue*, edited by James Griffin should also have found a place, and Ion Idriess's *Drums of Mer*. There is also a book entitled *The Torres Strait Islands* by Noel Finch, though I am not sure if it has ever been generally released. Of the six volumes in the A.N.U. series on Torres Strait Islanders, only Volume One has been included. Considering that Hill and Barlow state that "very little has been published on the Torres Strait Islands", these omissions are curious.

Educational reports and evaluations such as B.H. Watts' *Access to Education*, Joan Binnion's *Secondary Education for Aborigines*, and the Aboriginal Consultative Group's *Education for Aborigines*, are not included in this bibliography. I assume they were considered and rejected on the grounds of being too esoteric.

I have some relatively minor reservations (for instance, the review of Upfield's *The Bone Is Pointed*, should mention the other books in the Bony series, since the criticisms are equally applicable to them).

In a work of such scope, each reader will inevitably disagree on some point of criteria, emphasis, selection or judgement. Yet this bibliography answers such an important need and does such a competent, thorough job that all will ultimately laud its appearance.

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