

HOW RACISM TAKES ROOT

by Beryle Banfield

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Extensive research on the development of racial attitudes in children has led to general agreement on several important points. By the age of four, most children are aware of their own racial identity and the racial identity of others.

By the age of about 10 years, the attitudes of most children will have been firmly crystallized and will reflect the racial attitudes dominant in their society. These research findings have important implications for those concerned with the elimination of racism in children's materials.

Racism in textbooks is usually most evident in five important areas: the historical perspective from which the material is presented; the characterization of Third World peoples; the manner in which their customs and traditions are depicted; the terminology used to describe the peoples and their culture and the type of language ascribed to them; and the nature of illustrations.

History in textbooks is usually presented from a Eurocentric perspective omitting or distorting the history of the Third World peoples prior to the European contact. Third World people are portrayed as incapable of having developed their own institutions prior to the coming of the Europeans.

Encroachment on the land of the indigenous peoples is glorified as the opening up of the frontier by gallant and courageous European men and women. The slaughter of indigenous people is glossed over and the defenders of their homelands are depicted as marauding "savages" and cruel murderers. The colonization and slavery experiences are presented as beneficial to Third World people providing them with discipline and skills previously unknown to them. Rejection of the people's own culture in favour of assimilation into that of the European is regarded as desirable. The following excerpts are illustrative.

"Fighting broke out between the Maori and Europeans over whose land was whose just as in earlier days there had been battles between one Maori tribe and another. But at last the fighting stopped."

"During all the troubles the new settlers built towns, made farms and spread throughout New Zealand. From time to time the Maori tribes disagreed with the new ways but by

this time the European settlers had an army to help keep the peace."

In this passage, the taking of Maori land and the imposition of foreign rule and culture is glossed over. Justification of European actions is implied by the reference to earlier wars between Maori groups. The destruction of Maori culture is dismissed and the use of force to impose an alien culture is justified as necessary to keep the peace.

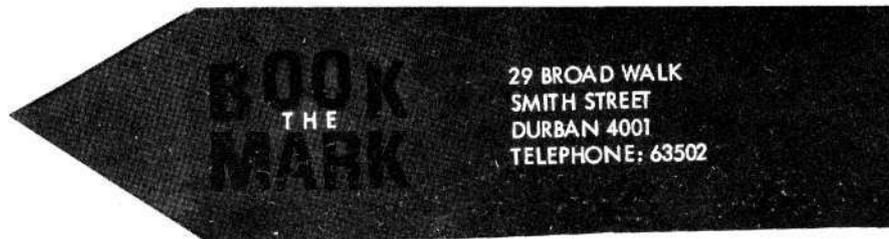
"The Eastern Woodland Indians did not develop a highly advanced culture. But their culture did make it possible for them to live successfully in ways suited to their needs . . ."

"Beginning in the mid 1600's the world of the Eastern Woodland Indians suddenly changed. The Indians faced Europeans, who were people with more advanced cultures. These Europeans had better weapons, better tools, and more advanced forms of political organization."

This text clearly evaluated the culture of the Eastern Woodland Indians from a Eurocentric viewpoint. The society they developed was in many ways more politically sophisticated than that of the Europeans in terms of the participation of women in the political decision-making process and the general level of citizen involvement. The political organization of the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy served as the model for the colonies when they moved to set up a new nation.

Illustrations provide powerful reinforcement for the racial stereotypes projected in textual materials and play a considerable role in forming a child's first impressions of other peoples. Such stereotypes have now become internationalized. There is the African child, naked except for a bracelet on her ankle; the Mexican, wearing a sombrero and reclining under a cactus, the half-naked American Indian, in a feather headdress and carrying a bow and arrow, the Chinese coolies and the blond American cowboy.

These are caricatural figures, as true and as false as any caricature; their danger is that they polarize the child's perceptions and in so doing conceal from him the immense achievements of other peoples and the rich variety of other cultures. □



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