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# REWRITING THE ABORIGINES' ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Two sources have recently criticized the biased view of Aborigines presented in some Australian school textbooks.

In its publication *Development News Digest* the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, a co-ordinator for thirty voluntary agencies in the field, criticized particularly textbooks for social studies courses at primary school level.

"Attitudes which are condescending towards the people of Asia and towards Australian Aborigines, factual errors, superficial stereotypes, and biased treatment of other cultures are all too frequent," the magazine says.

Humphrey McQueen, an author and senior lecturer in history at the Australian National University, claims that most local history textbooks used by children, discriminate against Aborigines by either ignoring them or treating them as being at a lower evolutionary stage of development.

"Usually the Aborigines are just left out of Australian history books," he says. "If they do get in they are portrayed as victims—people to whom European history happens. The white man makes history, the Aborigines are passive recipients."

*"Ugly Australians."*

The Council for Overseas Aid claims that the courses and books being used could create a generation of "ugly Australians". It shares Mr McQueen's view that the books give Aborigines a passive role in Australian history, but is also concerned about the effect this will have on the attitudes children adopt as a result.

"Racist attitudes are being nurtured in young children through exposure to learning material which shows Asians and Aborigines in a negative way."

The council bases its view on a survey carried out by its education unit. *Development News Digest* quotes examples from school textbooks. One textbook says "Each year more and more Aborigines

are learning to live the way we do. They find it easier to live that way."

About black Africans a secondary school geography textbook said "The natives in fact seem as destructive as baboons, but it is very difficult to get them to change their habits."

Mr McQueen claims that prior to the 1960's history books scarcely mentioned the Aborigines and when they did it was usual to propagate the conventional myths about them. "Australian history until now has meant white Australian history."

## *Ignorance about Aborigines*

It was common for amateur historians of the nineteenth century to relate their experiences with Aborigines, but professional and academic historians since 1900, says Mr McQueen, have omitted nearly all reference to them. The effect of this, he says, has been to leave most Australians ignorant about the history of the Aborigines, the nature of their life-style, and the problems they face today as a result. It is only Aboriginal self-assertion since 1960, says McQueen, that has begun to stimulate an appreciation of Aborigines.

Rather than simply write in a way as to make white Australians feel guilty and apologetic about their ancestors' behaviour towards Aborigines, McQueen suggests that historians should also concentrate on the active response of the Aboriginal community to their treatment. "We must stop writing of them as poor wretched victims and start writing of them as actors who initiated things and took positive action."

McQueen would also like to challenge the white community's presumption that its own civilization is inherently superior. He believes it is unfortunate that most white students equate civilization with a fourteen-square house, two cars and a television set.

## *Writing a New History*

McQueen's own response to these problems has been to write a new Australian history, a book