

Victorian Attitudes to Race. By Christine Bolt. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971. xviii, 254 pp. U.K. price: £3.00.

THE STUDY of race has become a substantial academic industry, and it is heartening that historians have begun to contribute to an enterprise hitherto largely monopolized by social scientists. Racist attitudes being founded on irrational prejudices, are not easily subjected to scientific analysis. But historians who are experienced in assessing men's actions and alibis can make a useful comment, if not a definitive statement, on the subject.

A good many of the historians who have looked at racial attitudes have been content with narrow specialization, usually on a regional level, and have thus been unable to make any useful observations on racism as a well-nigh universal phenomenon. But there have been some comparative studies. V. G. Kiernan's *The Lords of Human Kind*, an attempt to survey the attitudes of European imperial rulers to non-European subject peoples, was a book that ruined a good subject by sloppy and superficial research. It was, as he admitted, based on a 'random mixture' of materials. Fortunately Philip Mason's *magnum opus*, *Patterns of Dominance*, has done something to redeem the historian's reputation. By comparison with Mason's book, Christine Bolt's *Victorian Attitudes to Race* is rather slight, but it is at least an earnest scholarly exploration of a strangely neglected subject.

The Victorians managed to acquire a reputation for enlightened racial attitudes which has endured to this day. Yet such a reputation, if justified at all, applies more to the early than later Victorians; it reflected the activities of such bodies as the Aborigines' Protection Society and such monuments to humanitarian idealism as New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi. Dr Bolt has concentrated on a later period, and in particular on the Victorians' responses to the Indian mutiny, the American civil war, and the Jamaican revolt of 1865. She demonstrates convincingly that racist sentiments, hitherto submerged, had become widespread; that the humanitarian and missionary societies were no longer a powerful force. The Indian mutiny and the Jamaican revolt (and one could add the Anglo-Maori wars of the 1860s, though Dr Bolt hardly explores the subject) shocked Victorian complacency about the efficacy and universality of their civilization — all the more so because of the apparent ingratitude of the rebellious natives.

Victorians were hard put to explain the revolts. Some, as Dr Bolt shows, were content to revive ancient explanations of racial differences, including the biblical myth which divided mankind into the descendants of Shem, Japhet and Ham, with the black sons of Ham forever cursed. Others revived polygenesis theories as another way of 'explaining' the alleged inferiority of non-whites. But most fell upon new quackeries — especially such pseudo-sciences as phrenology — and Social Darwinism as a means of explaining the 'survival of the fittest races'. Evolutionary theories of history had been current in the late eighteenth century; they acquired a new lease of life in the later nineteenth century by false analogy to Darwin's theory of biological evolution. The white Europeans were placed at the top of the evolutionary scale; black Africans (and a few other blacks like the Australian Aborigines) at the bottom. The ranking was, it seemed, confirmed by the opening up of 'Darkest Africa' by intrepid Victorian explorers, a subject Dr Bolt touches on briefly.

There are some grounds for quibbling over Dr Bolt's performance. It is difficult to accept her assumption that Darwin's theory of evolution promoted a recrudescence of polygenesis; rather, it seems to have rendered the whole debate between the mono- and polygenesisists obsolete. And one wonders just how familiar Dr Bolt is with Darwin's book since she repeatedly inserts a second definite article in the title. It is of course *The Origin of Species*. New Zealand readers will be surprised by reference to Anglo-Maori wars in the 1850s (p. 30) as well as the 1860s. Those who specialize in other areas discussed by Dr Bolt may well find a small quota of errors, but this is the occupational hazard of the comparative historian.

It would be unfair to end on a sour note. *Victorian Attitudes to Race* is a significant contribution to the comparative study of race. And, as Dr Bolt shows, it has some relevance to current racial attitudes: regrettably the Victorians' racial prejudices are still with us.

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