

The History of White People

By **Nell Irvin Painter**

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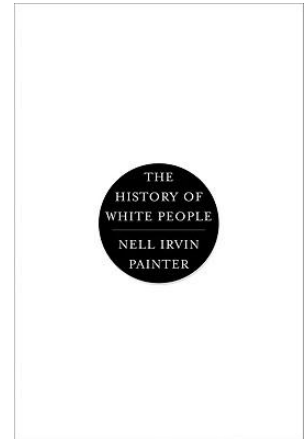
In current debates about immigration, not only in the USA but around the world, the dynamics of preference are rarely without an element of ethnic, racial or other cultural judgement in play. It is one of those areas of human interaction where perhaps, even knowing history well, we seem condemned to repeat it. In this masterful presentation, Nell Irvin Painter takes us through the history of the social construction we call “white people” or “whiteness.” It is a frightening passage over stormy seas where the bark of human nature has yet to reach safe haven. Concepts of race may be long debunked from a scientific perspective, but their historical and continuing impact on human thinking and social structures is very real. Their story has rarely been examined so thoroughly from the perspective of dominant culture as it is in this volume.

A History of White People provides a coherent chronology of the creation, propagation and defense of “whiteness.” At the same time it clears up common misconceptions about the targets of racism. For example, despite the fact that that the term “race” is likely to generate an image of the oppression of people of color resulting from the African slave trade and colonialism, this is in reality only one manifestation of racial patterning in a very long story of how difference has been identified and exploited. Whiteness is about superiority and belonging, the creation and defense of privilege, and above all, the shaping of an ideology that has penetrated social structures, politics, economics, colonialism and warfare.

While beginning her overview in classical times, Painter soon moves into the heart of the story, the development of the concepts of race and beauty in European thinking since the Renaissance. She then lands squarely at home, focusing on the continuity of these ideas and their consequences in the US American story. In North American history, most slaves, indentured folk, “degenerates” and cannon fodder have been white people who were not yet white. They were betimes described as the *guano* or fertilizer for the new nation, which was to be owned, managed and enjoyed by those whose identity was variously described as English, Saxon, Nordic, etc. These are the tall, fair, strong, brave and beautiful men (and their women) chosen and destined by God to lead, dominate and civilize the continent, the “real” Americans. The rest, “failed representatives of failed races,” deserved no lasting place in it.

Whiteness in the USA, as Painter points out underwent several expansions as acculturated immigrant populations such as the Germans and then the Irish (often caricatured with ape-like faces) succeeded in penetrating the social structure to the point of “becoming white.” They were followed in ensuing decades by newly whitewashed Slavs, Italians and Jews who had paid their dues as victims of racism before being allowed into the white club. Blacks and to a lesser degree Native Americans and Asian Immigrants had no claim to citizenship for the greater part of US history, but served rather as the foil to the legitimation of those aforementioned groups who were becoming “white.”

A good part of the book examines the development and propagation of racial superiority in science, philosophy, religion and popular thinking, everything from the collecting and measuring of skulls, employed overly long in nascent anthropology to determine racial superiority, to attempts to find genes and chromosomes to support differentiation in the humanity by race and color. As the focus shifts to the continuation of the whiteness story in the USA, connections continue to be made to both British and



continental figures in science and philosophy who shaped concepts of white superiority. Clifford Longley in *Chosen People: The Big Idea that Shapes England and America* documented well the sense of divine election which, no doubt, from the sermons of Cotton Mather to the radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin, strongly seconded the sense of God's confirmation of the "white man's burthen" as rooted in race.

Examining the scientific community, Painter documents the uphill struggle to move anthropology away from deterministic natural causes for human racial identity in order to validate a role for environment and nurture in the shaping of human diversity. But the struggle begun by Franz Boas is not over yet, as even today's newspaper describes how the scientific community is processing the newly discovered evidence that *homo sapiens* outside Africa shared genes with hairy *homo neanderthalensis*. Along with anthropologists, even today's interculturalists can be inclined to define and look for ethnic traits from an essentialist perspective.

At this point, I pause to note that the dynamics of race examined in this book are likely to cause shock and raise defensiveness. Some readers will be inclined to dismiss it as the work of a black researcher with an axe to grind. Nothing could be further from the truth. *The History of White People* contains no racial invective. but is a readable as well as scholarly presentation that credits important figures in European and US history with their legitimate accomplishments. At the same time it documents clearly where their thinking, research, writing, politics and actions produced, bolstered and enforced the kind of racial thinking and behavior that substantially influenced their contemporaries and following generations.

It may be hard for some to learn that heroes and icons of US history such as Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sam Houston, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Ford and countless others of power and influence clearly elaborated and supported attitudes and policies of racial superiority. Institutions of higher learning such as Harvard and Stanford were prime forces in the dissemination of scientific support for these attitudes. It would surprise many US Americans to know that the eugenic research and principles that drove Nazi genocide were to a great degree fabricated in the USA and even underwritten at times by the stateside economic barons before World War II. "Made in the USA" was, in fact cited as a defense by accused Nazis at Nuernburg.

Painter's is the sort of presentation that leads more to stunned silence than ringing applause. It is well written, well documented and well indexed. For intercultural professionals *The History of White People* raises questions about our basic assumptions and likely ethnocentricity as well as about the hegemony of our methodology. Do we perhaps still play an uncounscious role in the ongoing colonization still implicit in globalizing everything from education to management and commercial ventures? Humanity continues to wrestle with its racial understandings, and we who work at the interface of cultures need to concern ourselves with the balance between our own self esteem and the danger of adopting attitudes that demean others.