The Skull Measurer’s Mistake

The Roving Reader Files

This title caught my eye: The Skull Measurer’s Mistake. Skull measurer? Mistake? What could this mean? We know it’s not great to measure our waists inaccurately, as we burst out of our clothes if they’re too small. But skulls?

Once I’d picked up Skull Measurer (published 1997) I was hooked. The rest of the title tells you why: and Other Portraits of Men and Women Who Spoke Out Against Racism. Concisely and deftly Sven Linqvist navigates the intellectual currents around the ethnic
stereotyping that characterised popular imagination on both sides of the Atlantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and those who opposed it.

Some of these individuals are familiar, others are not, but together their stories take us along the bumpy road of opposition to the development of racist ideology.

From comparatively innocent beginnings, finding fault with those who were ‘different’, racist ideology progressed through increasingly complex philosophical constructs about the God-given superiority and inferiority of the races, to horrific biological determinism, which in the early decades of the twentieth century made inevitable the intention in some quarters to annihilate whole (supposedly ‘defective’) populations. Skull measuring to ‘prove’ superiority was only one stop on the journey towards eugenically-inspired ethnic cleansing.

Appalling as it was, racist ideology had its uses. It justified the enslavement of particular races and supported the imperialist drive to grab even more of other people’s land.

Racist ideologues invented a motley cast of characters to populate their bizarre world. Among them were the disappearing Native American and disappearing Black, both destined to perish, superseded by more vigorous Anglo-Saxon Germanic stock. Joined later by the disappearing Irishman and (of course) the disappearing Jew, they were timeless stereotypes, whose characteristics helped dictate popular attitudes to their human counterparts in the real world.

Taken to its logical conclusion racist ideology unleashed paroxysms of brutality. But it’s worth repeating that brave individuals have always striven to stem this remorseless tide, aware that these were not just intellectual games. **Racist ideology affected life (and death) in the here and now.**

Ask Amos Ford. Born in British Honduras in 1916, even in the 1980s he was still smarting from his experiences helping the British war effort forty years before.

Once World War II had started several hundred colonial Black British Hondurans had done their patriotic duty to the Mother Country by putting their professional forestry skills at the disposal of the Ministry of Supply. Voyaging thousands of dangerous miles, many had dodged torpedoes or been sunk along the way. But rather than being met with gratitude, they suffered racially-motivated discrimination, neglect and misrepresentation.

Over the years, Amos tried to uncover the truth behind this misrepresentation, painstakingly researching, writing and publishing (in 1985) his *Telling the Truth. The Life and Times of the British Honduran Forestry Unit in Scotland (1941-44).* What he’d unearthed were documents revealing the influence of the same ideological constructs Sven Lindqvist describes.

Certain Colonial Office officials, sympathetic to the Hondurans, tried to arrange for their humane treatment in the severe Scottish winters. But it was an uphill struggle to counter, amongst their peers in the Ministry of Supply, the all-too-familiar stereotype of lazy, sexually predatory, infantile Blacks in need of White leadership, whose work was naturally inferior to that of their White counterparts.

As if this were not enough, Amos also stumbled across a letter to the Prime Minister from the Duke of Buccleuch (on whose Scottish estates the Hondurans were billeted), in which eerie echoes reverberated of the racist stereotypes at the core of the Fascist ideology Britain was opposing.

Whilst the Duke welcomed the Hondurans and hoped they would be well treated, he bitterly complained about the mixing of the men with local White women. He disliked the “mixture of colour” and regretted it was allowed with no discouragement. For him, there were already sufficient “births of ‘foreign’ extraction” in Britain without the added “complication” of colour. Although he was sorry for “these people in a
strange land," he felt that "unsophisticated country girls" should be discouraged from marrying "Black men from Equatorial America."

Here, alive and kicking, were the ‘hierarchy of races’ and ‘purity of blood’ ideologies anti-racists had argued against for decades. They permeated the British establishment of the time, just as they permeated those on the Continent.

The racist attitudes of the Duke and the Ministry of Supply brought suffering to the British Hondurans, but, as Sven Lindqvist would surely point out, it should not be forgotten that certain Colonial Office officials and kind-hearted Scottish locals did their best to protect the men from the worst excesses of neglect.

**The Duke of Buccleuch was a man of his times, socialised in a bygone era. Nowadays we need to answer our own set of questions. Faced with similar circumstances, which side would you or I be on?**

To find out about the skull measurer, his mistake, and the other individuals Sven Lindqvist introduces, all you need to do is come into the Centre (after we reopen in Central Library on 22nd March! – Ed.) and take a look at *The Skull Measurer’s Mistake: and Other Portraits of Men and Women Who Spoke Out Against Racism*, published 1997. The saga of the British Honduran foresters is described by Amos Ford in his *Telling the Truth. The Life and Times of the British Honduran Forestry Unit in Scotland (1941-44)*, published 1985.