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Ashley H. Robins

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This book presents a multidisciplinary overview of how and why human populations vary so markedly in their skin colour. The biological aspects of the pigment cell and its product melanin are reviewed. Pigmentation in organs other than skin (e.g. eye, ear and brain) are considered as are the common pigmentary disorders. Detailed reflectance data from worldwide surveys of skin colour are also presented. The historical and contemporary background of the phenomenon is explored in sociological terms. Finally, the possible evolutionary forces which shape human pigmentation are assessed. This fascinating account will be of interest to graduate students and researchers of biological anthropology, anatomy, physiology and dermatology, as well as to medical practitioners.

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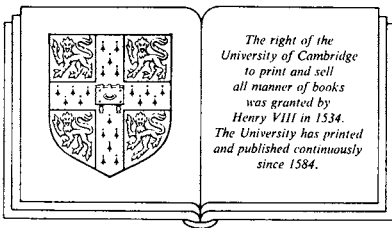
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To my father and in memory of my late mother

Preface

Benjamin Franklin is alleged to have written: ‘But in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes’. And one is sorely tempted to add ‘the colour problem’. As black people have discovered during this and previous centuries, skin colour is the most decisive and the most abused of all the physical characteristics of humankind. It determines social perceptions, value judgments and interpersonal relationships, and it can wreak havoc on an individual’s sense of dignity and self-esteem.

In this book I have endeavoured to analyse the essential nature and functions of human skin colour. I have done this predominantly from a biological standpoint, although I have included a chapter on the psychosocial dimensions of the subject and also one on the possible evolutionary forces which have determined skin colour variations among populations in different geographical regions. Disorders of pigmentation receive special attention, and I have given fairly detailed consideration to the pigmentation that occurs in sites other than the skin and hair.

The field of melanin pigmentation in all its guises is awash with journal articles, monographs and books. I have generally restricted references either to the original authors or to updated reviews, as it would have been unnecessarily cumbersome to cite the multiplicity of contributors to a particular topic. An exception is where the matter under discussion is controversial, or where I expose a personal viewpoint (as I do in assessing the vitamin D hypothesis of skin depigmentation). Here I have felt obliged to furnish fuller documentation for the arguments advanced.

The problem of race and racial labelling has been one of the most taxing for me. The current *Zeitgeist* in physical anthropology is to jettison the idea of race as a biological entity. The reason is that race is arbitrary; racial categories are not clearly circumscribed and certain populations defy classification. Certain physical features, such as skin pigmentation, are not fixed racial characters but rather adaptive traits to suit a particular climate or environment. For example, the juvenile blondness of the otherwise very dark Aborigines of the Western Desert of Australia

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(which, as Carleton Coon noted, is not due to a Viking invasion!) creates disorder among those committed to racial typologies.

Racial groupings are so enshrined in our ways of thinking that it would have been impracticable in a volume on skin colour to dispense with racial designations. I have therefore not done so, but I must emphasize that this in no way implies my endorsement of the biological validity of racial divisions.

The assignment of names to the so-called races has been a vexatious one, compounded by the political overtones of words such as 'Negro'. In general I have adhered to the traditional anthropological nomenclature, namely, 'Negroid', 'Caucasoid', 'Mongoloid' and 'Amerindian' (while recognizing the limitations of such terms), but where the book deals with historical and socio-psychological issues I freely use the words 'black' and 'white' as they flow better with the less formal style of these sections.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, I owe an enormous debt to my wife, Edna, not only for her advice and wisdom but for her unflagging care and encouragement during my periods of writing and rewriting, which were always long, often trying, and sometimes desperate.