

# THE LEGEND OF A WHITE NATIVE RACE

(A Contribution to the History of Albinism)

by

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## *Introduction*

GENERALIZED albinism is a condition which exists in probably every vertebrate animal as well as in many non-vertebrates and plants. First European references to the condition in man were made at least as early as the first century A.D., and the condition has been recorded amongst all the races of the world. It is an inherited abnormality and the classical generalized albino was envisaged by Pearson *et al.* (1913), as '...one whose skin is of characteristic pallor or milky whiteness, whose hair is white tinged possibly with yellow or straw, and whose eyes have pink or red pupils, translucent irides, with the usual accompaniments of defective vision, nystagmus and ametropia'. Not all genotypical cases are of the classical type as some variation in expression of the genotype is bound to occur, but all generalized albinos are conspicuous individuals and are often of startling appearance especially if they belong to one of the dark-skinned races.

Because it was difficult for early writers to imagine isolated cases arising from normally pigmented parents the idea of the existence of a white native race or isolate groups gradually evolved, and for various reasons was not completely abandoned until comparatively recently.

Generalized albinism is almost certainly due to a single recessive autosomal gene with the homozygote showing the trait. The heterozygote probably shows no gross pigmentary abnormality.

## *Origin of the Term Albino*

The basis of the word albino is the Latin 'albus'. The actual word is Portuguese and the first use of it is usually ascribed to Balthazar Tellez (1660) when referring to albino negroes whom he and other traders had seen around the African coast. The word may then have become used in colloquial speech, but it was not until at least a century later that it came into general use in the English, French or German language. Robertson (1777), in his *History of America*, refers to white negroes and adds '... they are called albinos by the Portuguese'; and Rayer (1789) writing in French, uses the term in identical fashion. By the nineteenth century it was in general use. The corresponding feminine term 'albiness' enjoyed a short period of popularity but is now never used.

An interesting side-track on the origin of the term is worth exploration. Both Pliny and Gellius when referring to undoubted albinos (see later) state that

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they come from Albania. The similarity in the two words might suggest that albino was used to denote an inhabitant of that country. This is probably not the case. Albania was used by the Greeks to signify a distant or unexplored country and by the early Roman writers to mean much the same. By the first century A.D. Albania had come to denote more definitely the land between the Eastern Caucasus and the Caspian Sea and derived its name from the alleged fact that it was settled by persons from Alba in Italy probably as early as 65 B.C. (Dionysius). The present Albania of the Adriatic littoral did not receive its name until much later. On this evidence it would seem that the relationship between Albania and albino is fortuitous. However, it seems certain that before the word albino came into general use albinos were referred to as 'Albians' or 'Albanes'. Holland (1634) in the index of his translation of Pliny's *History* calls the albinos 'Albanes', and in the churchyard of the Parish Church of Worsborough in Yorkshire there is an epitaph, dating from 1632, of an albino child:

This boy no Albian was yet grey-haired born,  
Who saw old age and night as soon as morne.

(Pearson *et al.*, 1913).

#### *Early References*

The earliest references to 'white' natives are by the elder Pliny who refers to a race of persons in Ethiopia '... whom the Greeks call the white Ethiopians'. Ptolemy (Ptolemy (a)) amongst others, makes similar mention. The word Ethiopian is used here to signify a person from the hinterland of the African coast '... those from the equator to the summer Tropic' (Ptolemy (b)). Ethiopia itself was the unknown land beyond the north African coastal area of Libya. These Leucaethiopes could well have been Berbers or some other light-skinned tribe. Mention of persons probably albinos is made by Pliny in a later book and also by Aulus Gellius. They both quote from the Greek writer Isogonus of Nicaea. Holland's (1634) translation of Pliny's version of Isogonus is '... a sort of people born in Albania, with eyes like owls, whereof the sight is fire-red: who from their childhood are grey-haired and can see better by night than by day'. Rackham (1942) translates the same passage as '... certain people born in Albania with keen grey eyes and are bald from childhood, and see better by night than by day'. Rolfe's (1948) translation of Aulus Gellius' version of Isogonus is '... further it was handed down as tradition that in a distant land called Albania men are born whose hair turns white in childhood and who see better in the night than in the day-time'. Allowing for translation difficulties the persons alluded to could well have been albinos. At any rate they were classified with all other real or legendary creatures who were considered as being somewhere between man and ape in the evolutionary scale, and were grouped with the Troglodyta.

This mention by Roman writers of a race of albinos is important. When, in the seventeenth century, accounts reached Europe of white Indian groups in America and the Indies they were generally accepted without argument and

were even elaborated. One of the reasons for this immediate acceptance was the mention of a white race of natives in Roman writings.

*Later Developments*

From the decline of Rome until the sixteenth century no further reports of white-skinned natives appear in West European literature. Even if there had been they would not have been viewed in any fresh light. Very little advancement in scientific thinking occurred in Europe between the fall of Rome and the latter part of the twelfth century, and even then the scientific revival of the thirteenth century was in the direction of mathematics and optics rather than towards zoology and the metaphysical properties of being. Theology was still the mistress of all other sciences. Medicine was largely Galenic; to think otherwise was unorthodox and even heretical. Roger Bacon, one of the leaders of this revival who was also a Franciscan with traditional Augustinian views on theology, only echoed the scientific thought of the period when he considered experiment subservient to reason. It was not until the fourteenth century when Ockham and his followers strove to disengage faith from reason and refused to stretch knowledge beyond the bounds of experience, that the philosophical basis for the revolution in scientific method which followed and which ushered in a more genuinely scientific outlook in Europe than at any time since Ancient Greece, was laid. From the point of view of the white native race idea this period must be considered unproductive. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the great increase in the volume and extent of maritime exploration opened up new fields for commerce and colonisation, the extravagant tales of returning travellers, sailors and missionaries fell on the ears of a public, largely illiterate and wholly credulous, whose scientific leaders, although showing a more advanced outlook than previously, still clung, on the one hand, to a zeal for preserving the remains of Romanized Greek literature and on the other hand to an implicit belief in the miraculous. Traveller's tales were therefore not likely to be rejected merely through lack of what we would now consider as adequate evidence. The idea of the existence of a race of white natives appealed to the imagination and to the intellectual climate of the times, and the mention of such a race by Pliny only served to weaken the hand of the sceptic. Reports of the existence of such a race were therefore not seriously challenged until the latter half of the eighteenth century when the completely new scientific values which had been evolving during the preceding century were gaining more universal acceptance.

During this period reports of white natives came from the East as well as the West but the New World was to furnish the most complete material and so it is with this continent that we will be mostly concerned.

Probably the earliest report from America of a group of albinos is by Cortez (1519). Among the splendours of Montezuma's palaces which Cortez and his lieutenant, Bernal Diaz (1521) so vividly describe, were rooms, courtyards and even whole buildings put aside for the housing of dwarfs, hunchbacks and other deformed persons. Amongst these were obvious albinos. Cortez writes: 'In one

room of this palace he kept men, women, and children who had been white since their birth, face, body, hair, eyebrows and eyelashes'. These had been collected for the pleasure of the Emperor and cannot be considered as a natural isolate group. Cortez and Diaz travelled extensively in Mexico, Yucatan and Northern Panama but they make no further mention of white natives. Indeed there is no further reference to groups of albinos until the next century when Salcedo (1640), basing his report on the direct observation of the missionary Adrian de Santo Tomas, referred to the Tulecuna Indians of Eastern Panama who numbered amongst their tribe many who were '. . . white and blonde as Flemings'. The Tulecuna inhabit the forest and littoral of the San Blas coast, and although this coast had been tentatively surveyed as early as 1501 by Rodrigo de Bastides, had been further explored by Gonzales de Badajoz in 1515 (Edwards, 1912) and, notwithstanding its ruggedness and unfriendliness must have provided, during the sixteenth century, both shelter and supplies for trading ships, privateers and colonizing and missionary expeditions, Salcedo's report appears to be the first in which specific mention of white natives among the Tulecuna is made. This casual reference was later confirmed and augmented in a remarkable book written by a remarkable man, and published in the last year of the seventeenth century (Wafer, 1699). Lionel Wafer had always been keen on the sea, and taking employment as a surgeon's boy on board ship in 1677 he visited Darien with Dampier's expedition of 1681 and lived for several months with the Tulecuna. His powers of observation and his accuracy of reporting details are in the highest tradition. Among his descriptions of the Panamanian flora and fauna he gives a fairly complete picture of the Tulecuna, estimating the frequency of their 'white' members at 0.3 to 0.5 per cent of the population (coinciding fairly exactly with twentieth-century calculations), stressing the fact that they are ethnologically similar to their normally pigmented fellows and are not a distinct race, refuting suspicions of European paternity, and altogether giving such a good clinical description that no reasonable doubt can be thrown upon their albinotic character. He offered no theories as to why some of these Indians should be born white, but contents himself by repeating the local lore that it was due to the mother gazing at the moon at the time of conception.

During the eighteenth century as further reports of the San Blas albinos were published as well as reports from other parts of the world (Leguat, 1708; Valentyn, 1724), Wafer's careful account was ignored or contorted to such an extent as to suggest that he implied the existence of a separate race of albinos. Hence Cossigny (1760) refers to a race of white natives '. . . in a district not far from Mexico'; Raynal (1774) suggests that Balboa, on his way to gaze upon the Pacific in 1513 would have had to pass through '. . . a country inhabited by little white men of the same type as are found in Africa and some of the islands of Asia'; and Robertson (1777) refers to the San Blas albinos as a race. This freedom of interpretation throws no credit on the interpreters as Wafer's account should have been well known, and his phraseology allows for no ambiguity when he states 'they are not a distinct race by themselves, but now

and then one is bred of a copper-coloured father and mother. . . .’ The influence of Roman and Greek writers was obviously still considerable in many of the European centres of learning.\*

The increase in the negro slave trade during the eighteenth century meant that Europeans and Americans were being repeatedly reminded that negro albinos were born of normally pigmented parents, and it also brought to light a rarer and more striking type of pigment anomaly, the classical piebald. With their curiosity value gone, with the white race argument in temporary abeyance, and with the shifting in emphasis in medicine in the direction of morbid anatomy, by the latter part of the century main interest in albinism was in the direction of clinical and pathological findings. Buzzi (1783) performed an autopsy on an albino and described the macroscopic findings; Geoffrey St.-Hilaire in 1832 attempted to classify albinism into morphological types (Busti-Rosner, 1956); and six years later Carron de Villards (1838) reported on the microscopic findings in a pair of albino eyes. To this pathological interest was added, by the middle of the nineteenth century, an anthropological one. No longer was the existence of an albino race seriously supported although Catlin (1866), in a book first published in 1841, referred to a tribe of Indians in upper Missouri amongst whom, he reckoned, at least 10 per cent were born with white skin and hair, and travellers who were altogether more accurate, more sceptical and less credulous in their observations than their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colleagues, far from exaggerating the number of albinos encountered gave them only cursory mention. Thus Pickering (1854) in his book *The Races of Mankind*, mentions seeing an albino in the Ellice Islands but dismisses the subject in three lines, and Turner (1884), in a 350-page book on Samoa, treats the matter in even more cavalier fashion employing only the five-word sentence: ‘. . . One albino had been seen’. In fact with the resurgence in population statistics the focus of attention inevitably became centred on Europe as being more able to provide basic data. By the latter part of the century the Italian Anthropological Society had collected data on albinism from 540 of the 8,300 Communes (Rasari, 1879), Arcoleo (1871) had ascertained 62 possible cases in the Palermo district of Sicily, Magnus (1886) had collected over 100 cases in Norway, and both in Scotland (Pearson *et al.*, 1913) and in Germany (Virchow, 1886), extensive surveys of hair and eye pigmentation of school-children had been conducted.

With the republication of Mendel’s work at the turn of the century and with Morgan’s preliminary investigations into the inheritance of certain characteristics in *Drosophila* it was at once obvious that albinism could furnish a good example of a conspicuous and well-known inherited condition in which basic Mendelian principles could be confirmed, and to this end Gunn (1907) pleaded for the collection of pedigrees. However the fundamentals of the statistical techniques to be applied to pooled sibship data were not at that time appreciated (they were not postulated until considerably later, e.g. by Hogben

\* Even at this time Linnaeus (1766) could turn a remarkable blind eye to fact, follow Galen, and classify albinos amongst the troglodyta.

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(1932), Haldane (1932) and Bedichek and Haldane (1938), and so the scrutiny of individual human pedigrees which were mostly of the unaffected by unaffected mating, although suggestive of Mendelian inheritance, were not entirely conclusive. These deficiencies in mathematical techniques led Bateson (1909) to state that '... albinism in man is a Mendelian recessive but its descent is complicated by some unascertained disturbance'. The 'unascertained disturbance' was, of course, an artefact. Pearson recognized that these deficiencies existed and realized that unless a freely inter-mating isolate group of albinos could be found and investigated no conclusive proof regarding the Mendelian nature of the inheritance could be forthcoming. The hunt for a white native race was on again.

A few years previously a newspaper (*The Standard*, 13 September 1904) carried an article referring to the existence of a large albino colony in the forest country 'back of Cape Cod'. The author stated that they were all members of the one kinship known locally as the 'Red-eyed Pittsleys'. Three years later the *Boston Sunday Herald* carried a story (17 December 1907) of a colony of albino backwoodsmen living near Boxwood City and Lakeville in Massachusetts. Pearson managed to obtain a pedigree of an albino family in this neighbourhood which may or may not have been the Pittsleys but the information derived from it was small (Pearson *et al.*, 1913). In the following year Hrdlicka (1908) published his results of an investigation into albinism amongst the Hopi and Zuni Indians of the south-western United States, amongst whose tribes albinism was supposed to be more frequent than usual, but found neither segregation nor mating of affecteds. When the thirteen tribes of 'white' Eskimos reported by Stefansson (1912) turned out not to be albinos at all (MacRichie, 1912) Pearson had reluctantly to admit that he could add little to Bateson's original statement.

In 1924 the question of the San Blas albinos was again raised in rather dramatic fashion. An American explorer, R. O. Marsh, returned from an extensive trip through areas near the San Blas coast with the story that about 1,000 albinos lived in the mountains within twenty miles of the sea and completely segregated from their normally pigmented fellows. Since inter-marriage between whites and browns was forbidden the albino colony represented a human geneticist's dream, i.e. a community of homozygotes for a rare recessive trait. Marsh brought three 'white' Indians back to Washington with him where their albinotic character was definitely established, and as a result of his expedition the white native race idea received fresh publicity in the lay (*Illustrated London News*, 26 July 1924, p. 181; *M'Clures Magazine*, LII (3): 46, July 1924) as well as the scientific press. The following year an expedition was equipped, and although local Panamanian political troubles limited their operations they were able, on considerable evidence, to refute Marsh's allegation of albino segregation (Harris, 1926). Further investigations amongst the San Blas (Nordenskiöld, 1938; Wassen, 1938) showed that although certain aspects of their culture resulted in considerable social pressure against the albinos, these latter lived freely intermingled and at peace with their brown

compatriots, and even though looked upon as physically inferior they were considered more intelligent, freer from sin and altogether nearer to God.

The prospect of a freely mating isolate group among the San Blas was rapidly receding, and when Stout (1946), in a further careful study, confirmed these latter findings, the existence of a Panamanian white Indian race was dead.

### Summary

The existence of a white native race first mentioned on slim evidence by a lesser Greek writer as existing in a remote land was transcribed into classical Roman writing and so became established as unarguable fact until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. The partial submergence of Roman and Greek influence coincident with the rise in new scientific values in the nineteenth century, and the reappraisal of the veracity of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travellers' reports, caused the white race idea to fall into disrepute for want of acceptable evidence. With the dawn of population genetics at the turn of the present century the possible existence of isolate groups containing large numbers of homozygotes for a rare recessive trait took on a new importance. The suggestion in 1924 that in fact such an isolate group did exist in eastern Panama was responsible for the furnishing of several expeditions to, and investigations of, the San Blas Indians. None of these was able to substantiate the existence of such an isolate group, and with some contact established with even the most primitive and inaccessible of the world's people it seems unlikely that such an isolate group exists at the present day.

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