

especially after William Shawn took over the magazine following Ross's death in 1951. More of his pieces began to be rejected, and the ones that were accepted were given an editorial going-over Thurber found humiliating. He also came to think he had been financially exploited by the magazine (Kinney suggests he was probably right). A chance to settle scores came with a project to write a personal history of the *New Yorker*, which he titled *The Years with Ross* (1959). The book, a mainly affectionate portrait, did very well, but it also widened the rift with the magazine and his old friends there.

Thurber's last few years are mainly best forgotten. For most of his life, he had warded off his own ever-threatening despair through an extraordinarily buoyant and resourceful imagination. As he became acutely ill with an undiagnosed tumor, however, his bitter rants lapsed into full-scale incoherence, until he died in 1961. We are left—at least those of us who still have a taste for it—with a treasured legacy of subtle laughter, which this biography goes far to evoke.

Cleopatra's Nose

Not Out of Africa:
How Afrocentrism Became
An Excuse to Teach Myth
as History

by Mary Lefkowitz

Basic Books. 222 pp. \$24.00

Reviewed by
Chester E. Finn, Jr.

MARY LEFKOWITZ, a distinguished classicist at Wellesley College, has set out to debunk the myths of Afrocentrism, particularly those that have arisen in the realm

CHESTER E. FINN, JR., *John M. Olin fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C., is co-editor, with Lamar Alexander, of The New Promise of American Life.*

of her own special expertise: the civilization of ancient Greece. Her book is valuable not just for the lucid erudition she brings to the task of exposing falsehoods and nonsense, but also for her use of the contretemps over Afrocentric history to illuminate problems in contemporary education—problems that extend far beyond the debate over the color of Cleopatra's nose.

A word first about those problems. Although Afrocentrism has its roots in higher education, its tendrils extend into what is taught in the public schools, particularly in big cities. Perhaps its first major appearance was in the late 1980's in Portland, Oregon, where the local school district, in response to a court desegregation order, engaged a "multicultural coordinator" who, in turn, retained the Afrocentrist educator Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University as an adviser who, in turn, hired consultants to write what became known as the *Portland Baseline Essays*.

These tracts, which trace much of human knowledge—the development of art, science, philosophy, etc.—to a black civilization that once inhabited ancient Egypt, have become the bible of Afrocentric education in the United States. Especially in cities with large black enrollments in their schools, curricula based on the *Portland Baseline Essays* are widely in use, the more so where school officials have opted for esteem-building programs in place of those that impart basic skills.

The politics of big-city education being what they are, few can easily resist this trend. The Afrocentric curriculum conforms, after all, to the ideological proclivities of teacher-college faculties and influential professional groups such as the National Council for Social Studies and the National Association of Black School Educators. Afrocentrism, moreover, has become the specialty of pl

the acceptance and spread of their curricular emphases and teaching methods in primary and secondary schools. (Few such academics have actually done original research or published their findings in scholarly journals; most, rather, are simply popularizers and evangelists of the creed.)

The Afrocentric curricular project has two objectives. The first is to highlight the contribution blacks have made to civilization, particularly to our own. This enterprise, perfectly legitimate up to a point—figures like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois formerly did not receive the attention they deserved in school textbooks—first got under way two decades ago. Today, if anything, the rectification campaign has gone overboard in the opposite direction, at the expense of historical balance and truth.

The second and more pernicious mission of the Afrocentrists is to create a past that never existed—a past in which Africa was at the center of world history. This is done primarily by tracing key elements of Western civilization and contemporary culture to African roots, and crucially to ancient Egypt. If it can be demonstrated that major strands in Western philosophy, literature, and mathematics originated in the land of the pharaohs, and if it can also be shown that ancient Egypt was an "African" civilization in more than the narrowly geographic sense, then large parts of Western learning and culture can be claimed and celebrated as African. Many a forest has fallen in service to this cause, and many an American student is now being taught that Socrates was black and other such non-facts.

IN *Not Out of Africa*, Lefkowitz explores and explodes the predominant Afrocentric legends, like the "myth of African origins" which holds that not only Socrates but

GLEN V. POOLE, JR.
74079

especially after William Shawn took over the magazine following Ross's death in 1951. More of his pieces began to be rejected, and the ones that were accepted were given an editorial going-over Thurber found humiliating. He also came to think he had been financially exploited by the magazine (Kinney suggests he was probably right). A chance to settle scores came with a project to write a personal history of the *New Yorker*, which he titled *The Years with Ross* (1959). The book, a mainly affectionate portrait, did very well, but it also widened the rift with the magazine and his old friends there.

Thurber's last few years are mainly best forgotten. For most of his life, he had warded off his own ever-threatening despair through an extraordinarily buoyant and resourceful imagination. As he became acutely ill with an undiagnosed tumor, however, his bitter rants lapsed into full-scale incoherence, until he died in 1961. We are left—at least those of us who still have a taste for it—with a treasured legacy of subtle laughter, which this biography goes far to evoke.

Cleopatra's Nose

Not Out of Africa:
How Afrocentrism Became
An Excuse to Teach Myth
as History

by Mary Lefkowitz

Basic Books. 222 pp. \$24.00

Reviewed by
Chester E. Finn, Jr.

MARY LEFKOWITZ, a distinguished classicist at Wellesley College, has set out to debunk the myths of Afrocentrism, particularly those that have arisen in the realm

CHESTER E. FINN, JR., *John M. Olin fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.*, is co-editor, with Lamar Alexander, of *The New Promise of American Life*.

of her own special expertise: the civilization of ancient Greece. Her book is valuable not just for the lucid erudition she brings to the task of exposing falsehoods and nonsense, but also for her use of the contrepoids over Afrocentric history to illuminate problems in contemporary education—problems that extend far beyond the debate over the color of Cleopatra's nose.

A word first about those problems. Although Afrocentrism has its roots in higher education, its tendrils extend into what is taught in the public schools, particularly in big cities. Perhaps its first major appearance was in the late 1980's in Portland, Oregon, where the local school district, in response to a court desegregation order, engaged a "multicultural coordinator" who, in turn, retained the Afrocentrist educator Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University as an adviser who, in turn, hired consultants to write what became known as the *Portland Baseline Essays*.

These tracts, which trace much of human knowledge—the development of art, science, philosophy, etc.—to a black civilization that once inhabited ancient Egypt, have become the bible of Afrocentric education in the United States. Especially in cities with large black enrollments in their schools, curricula based on the *Portland Baseline Essays* are widely in use, the more so where school officials have opted for esteem-building programs instead of those that impart basic knowledge.

The politics of big-city education being what they are, few resist this trend. The Afrocentric curriculum comes with the ideological baggage of the teacher-college and the potential professional prestige of the National Black Studies and the Center for the Study of Black Schools. Afrocentrism, more a specialty of platoons of academics, mostly found in university departments of ethnic or African-American studies, whose own careers hinge on

the acceptance and spread of their curricular emphases and teaching methods in primary and secondary schools. (Few such academics have actually done original research or published their findings in scholarly journals; most, rather, are simply popularizers and evangelists of the creed.)

The Afrocentric curricular project has two objectives. The first is to highlight the contribution blacks have made to civilization, particularly to our own. This enterprise, perfectly legitimate up to a point—figures like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois formerly did not receive the attention they deserved in school textbooks—first got under way two decades ago. Today, if anything, the rectification campaign has gone overboard in the opposite direction, at the expense of historical balance and truth.

The second and more pernicious mission of the Afrocentrists is to create a past that never existed—a past in which Africa was at the center of world history. This is done primarily by tracing key elements of Western civilization and contemporary culture to African roots, and crucially to ancient Egypt. If it can be demonstrated that major strands in Western philosophy, literature, and mathematics originated in the land of the pharaohs, and if it can also be shown that ancient Egypt was an "African" civilization in more than the narrowly geographical sense, then large parts of Western learning

are traced back to Africa, and a forest of myth is now

other key figures in ancient Greece, and even the populations of entire city-states, were of African descent.

One propagator of this particular

myth is the Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop, who has argued that Athens, the cradle of Western civilization, "was founded by a colony of Black Egyptians." It turns out—Lefkowitz is superb at lighting the dim corridors in which falsehood is transmuted into fact—that Diop bases his assertion on the writings of a 1st-century Sicilian named Diodorus, who was simply recounting what Egyptian priests had told him. Diodorus did not say he believed their tale, nor, as we learn from Lefkowitz, has anyone else, until today's Afrocentric historians. No doubt, like them, the Egyptians of Diodorus's day had their own reasons for magnifying the reach and influence of their civilization, but that does not mean their boasts were true.

Lefkowitz disposes in similar fashion of the Afrocentric assertion that Greek philosophy, among the most valuable legacies of the ancient world, was "stolen" from Egypt. Here she leads us through a tale spanning several centuries and featuring unexpected protagonists like

Mozart; various Freemasons; Marcus Garvey, who led a back-to-Africa movement among American blacks in the 1920's; and, in the 1950's, an obscure professor from Arkansas. As with the myth of African origins, she patiently shows where this notion came from, presents the evidence on which it is based, subjects that evidence to critical scrutiny, and shows the claim to be false or, at best, unsubstantiated by the weight of facts and analysis. And so it goes with the other major myths as well.

AMONG ACADEMIC disciplines, history, as Lefkowitz notes, may be the one that is farthest off course today. But the phenomenon she has pinpointed has spread widely, and is destructive everywhere it crops up, turning arguments over evidence into fights about motive, undermining academic freedom, and transforming the quest for truth into claims rooted in the celebration of ethnic diversity.

All the more reason, then, to be grateful for what she has done here, not merely by blowing the whistle

on charlatans and frauds and pseudoscience but also by declaring her faith in the very existence of historical truth and by demonstrating the painstaking labors through which, and only through which, it is ascertained. As she writes in the powerful conclusion of her work:

Students of the modern world may think it is a matter of indifference whether or not Aristotle stole his philosophy from Egypt. They may believe that even if the story is not true, it can be used to serve a positive purpose. But the question, and many others like it, should be a matter of serious concern to everyone, because if you assert that he did steal his philosophy, you are prepared to ignore or to conceal a substantial body of historical evidence that proves the contrary. Once you start doing that, you can have no scientific or even social-scientific discourse, nor can you have a community, or a university.

Or, one might add, a school to which you can, in conscience, entrust your child.

18 JUNE 96

C-SPAN: YOUR LITMUS TEST ON BOOK
REVIEWS IS AT HAND.
WHO'S NEXT?! MAYOR B. OF D.C?
SPIKE LEE? FARRAKHAN?
OR, A GENUINE SCHOLAR?
SHAME.

P.S: NEVER MIND. THE CHALLENGE IS TOO

~~ARDUOUS~~ FOR YOU. [72]
ARDUOUS

O. Books