*To Kill a Mockingbird* is the story of a brother and sister, Jem and Scout, who live in a small southern town. Their lives change as the reality of living in a racially divided town intrudes on their fishing, play-acting and other summer activities. Their father, Atticus Finch, is a lawyer who is given the task of defending a Negro accused of rape. As they become aware of the racially determined attitudes of their community, the children have to learn that moral right sometimes gives way to prejudice.

The book was first published in 1960, but it is set in the years 1933 to 1935. Harper Lee would assume that her readers were aware of the civil disturbances in the south in her time . . .

## The Southern States

The Negro people of the United States are descended mainly from West African and West Indian slaves, and are still concentrated in the southern states of Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Mississippi and Florida.

In the south, large landowners used slave labour on their cotton plantations. They justified slavery by claiming that all white people were superior to all coloured people. In contrast to the rich landowners, there were also extremely poor whites, who desperately clung to their 'white supremacy'. The movement to abolish slavery posed a threat to these poor whites, who would lose their privileged status over coloured people, so they supported the slaveholders in the Civil War (1861—1865).

## The Civil War and After

Tension between southern, slave-owning states and the northern states resulted in an attempt by the southern states to leave the union of United States. This led to the Civil War in 1861. The North (the Union) defeated the South (the Confederacy) and slavery was abolished.

Although the slaves were now free, the southern states refused to give them the vote, thus ensuring that they were not really free. The Constitution of the United States was amended to force the South to give coloured people the vote, but the southern states passed new laws making the coloured vote dependent on owning property, paying taxes, being literate, understanding the Constitution, being of good character, etc. In Louisiana 130,000 blacks voted in 1896, but only 5,000 in 1900. As late as 1957-1960 more than 700 coloured people with high school diplomas were prevented from registering by white officials in one county of Alabama on the grounds that they were 'unqualified'.

The disabilities suffered by coloured people in the South were clearly in conflict with the Constitution of the United States. They were based on


prejudice and enforced by shady legislation, intimidation and brute force. Because discrimination was entrenched in law, ordinary whites who supported it did not feel that they were doing wrong; they were on the side of 'law and order'.

But terror also played a part. Secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan acted against any coloured person who showed signs of challenging the doctrine of white superiority. Public whippings and killings were widespread. Starting from Mississippi in 1874, terror spread throughout the South and individual conscience became submerged in mob action.

For generations coloured people were doomed to inferior status, reinforced by Darwinist ideas of the survival of the fittest. Since whites were in control, they were clearly superior. Around this dominant idea clustered all kinds of pseudo-scientific notions about lower brain mass, sexual potency and promiscuity, innate character traits and the overriding importance of racial purity. A vicious circle resulted. Denied equal opportunities, black people were unable to advance and thus 'proved' their inferiority and justified their being kept in subjection.

In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan was revived and attracted a large following. Members wore masks and white robes to hide their identity. White crosses were burnt at night and public demonstrations were organized. The Klan intimidated blacks, but also Jews and Catholics, immigrants, those deemed to be immoral, as well as those who broke the prohibition (anti-alcohol) laws.

## The Civil Rights Movement and After

During the 1930s conditions changed rapidly as a result of the depression, industrialization and urbanization. In the 1940s, black and white Americans fought side by side in Europe and when they returned home, coloured servicemen were no longer so inclined to resign themselves to injustice. Black leaders pointed to the anomaly of fighting for democracy in Europe while it was denied in Alabama, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) increased its membership from 50,000 to close on 405,000 in the period 1940 to 1946. After the war, America was also more sensitive to international opinion. Further factors were economic prosperity and improved education among the coloured people of the South, and the important role of the Supreme Court in stripping injustice of its veneer of respectability.

In 1944 the US Supreme Court ruled that attempts to block Negroes' right to vote in the South were unconstitutional. Other decisions followed. In 1954 the

court determined that the segregation of public facilities — schools, parks, libraries, etc was illegal. Although few local authorities showed any willingness to implement these decisions, those who practised discrimination were made aware that they were flying in the face of legality and those who were the victims of injustice were encouraged to resist.

During the 1940s passive resistance, pioneered by Gandhi in South Africa and later in India, had been employed in northern US cities to secure the civil rights denied to Negroes. In the mid-50s the movement spread to the south. In 1957 the eyes of the world were focused on Montgomery, Alabama, where Rev Martin Luther King Jr led a protracted but ultimately successful boycott campaign against segregation on buses. King set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which used 'sit-ins' to great effect. By the end of 1961 more than 70,000 people had made use of this tactic.

## The Civil Rights Act

A turning point was reached in 1957 when the United States government called out federal troops to enforce school desegregation in Little Rock, Alabama, where state troops had been used to turn coloured students away. This move led to concerted resistance of a markedly racist stamp. Protests in Birmingham met with crude repression.

Many whites, however, resigned themselves to the inevitability of integration; some regarded resistance as 'bad for business' and some were convinced of the moral rightness of the Civil Rights movement. Growing unemployment and the approach of the centenary of emancipation in 1963, triggered increasing demonstrations against the persistence of discrimination. The sustained pressure of well-organized Negro protests, supported by increasing numbers of whites, led to President Kennedy introducing comprehensive anti-segregationist measures in September 1963. These were eventually steered through Congress by Lyndon Johnson and passed into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Yet the struggle for justice was to go on, assuming the more radical aspect of 'Black Power' under leaders like Stokey Carmichael. Radicalism was fuelled by the treatment meted out to moderates like Martin Luther King Jr. During the centenary celebrations in 1963 of President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, a civil rights group held 'walks to freedom' and mass rallies. A quarter of a million people gathered at the Washington Monument and marched to the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King addressed them. It is here that he spoke about the need for peaceful co-existence, repeatedly using the phrase "I have a dream" in a most effective way.

A march led by King from Selma to Alabama in 1965 was brutally broken up by state policemen. Black-led riots swept the United States. In April 1968 King was assassinated by a white man and rioting in more than 100 cities gave vent to black frustration — and produced an angry white backlash.

## Race Relations Today

Despite the civil rights legislation of the 60s, inequalities in American society continue and rights enjoyed in theory are not experienced in practice. Racial tensions are certainly still high.

In 1991, for many Americans (indeed, for many around the world) grainy video images were seared into the national consciousness: a black man struggling on the ground while Los Angeles police officers stood in a semicircle around him, beating him for 19 brutal seconds. The beating itself, and the initial exoneration of LAPD officers by a suburban Simi Valley jury, supported the notion that America remained a deeply racist society. The "not guilty" verdict for those white polite officers led to a full scale riot (http://www.citivu.com/ktla/sc-ch1.html) - angry fists and faces, broken glass and flames, 54 dead, 2,000 injured and the city of Los Angeles tearing itself apart before the world.

Ever since, the beating of Rodney King and the ensuing riots have formed a sombre backdrop to America's "dialogue" on race. When the black, and famous, O.J. Simpson (http://www.courttv.com/casefiles/simpson/) was found not guilty of the murder of his white wife and her white male friend, some black Americans said it was "payback for Rodney King."

*http://www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/vtc/PremiumDelivery/NCA/Englishliterature/ProseKeyStage4HT/20thCentury/ToKillaMockingbird/BackgroundInformation/TheCivilWarandafter/Default.htm*