

There's Danger in Rewritten History

WITHIN the so-called "information explosion" is a dangerous eruption of misinformation and untruths that range from political propaganda and distortion of news to rewriting of history for selfish ends.

Granted, history books might contain errors, omissions or biased presentations that should be corrected, but the practice of rewriting history for profit or to mislead the public is wrong.

Several years ago, Oklahoma Indians circulated petitions asking that textbooks be revised to present more accurately the Indians' role in development of the United States. There would appear to be ample justification for full review of this request.

Recently, an out-of-court settlement of a lawsuit was a tacit admission that portions of Alex Haley's book, "Roots," were copied from another book. Because of its wide distribution and presentation on television, this is significant. Millions probably read "Roots" as "true

American history." Is it?

Many people may have distorted impressions of history of other eras and important events, derived from what is called the "historical novel," rather than from objective reports of happenings.

Revision of history, with romantic embellishments, are common practice of some authors, because such books seem to sell well.

Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr have been portrayed as heroes of the American Revolution by rewriters of history, while others have tried to rationalize Hitler's murderous regime.

A ruckus has been raised about "In His Image; the Cloning of a Man," by David J. Rorvik. The argument is over whether this is fiction presented as fact, or fact presented as fiction. Who knows?

Publishers argue that the burden of proof is upon the author. Others say publishers may not evade responsibility so easily. The public has a right to know whether it is truth or just a novel.

Last summer the National Outlaw and Lawman Association met in California to gun down such Western stalwarts as Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday and to besmirch most early day outlaws and cowboys as phonies and cowards. What they gained by it is not clear.

History has never been a popular subject, making it easier for rewriters of history to put across their yarns. A New York Times survey of 2,000 college students found an average of only 50 percent accuracy among their answers to questions in American history.

In "1984," a novel published in 1949 that seems to be coming to pass, George Orwell portrayed an imaginary totalitarian world where history was continually rewritten. It was assumed by the Party in Power that if all records told the same lie, then the lie passed into history and became truth.

"Who controls the past controls the future," said the party slogan, "and who controls the present controls the past."