

## ABORIGINES

IN the course of his long sojourn in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, the Count became acutely interested in the condition and probable fate of the Australian aborigines. He made a close study of their environment and of the situation in which the aborigines had been placed by the coming of the white man.

In his volume he devoted a chapter to the aborigines, from which the following is taken.

"There once existed and there still exists an indigenous race in Australia which lived long unknown and is now rapidly passing away.

"Its history has no records, no monuments, but consists mostly of traditions which in common with their language, customs, moral, social and political condition seem, ever since their discovery, to have been regarded as a subject unworthy of European study.

"All the observations contained in the Narratives, whether of the early navigators or of modern travellers, bear more upon what this race is in relation to the Colonists than to mankind.

"Their origin is involved in impenetrable obscurity. Such authors as have attempted to trace their migrations, or to detect the links which connect them with any of the primitive races have not succeeded more satisfactorily than a naturalist would who might attempt to account for the existence of the *Marsupials* and the *Ornithorhynchus* in Terra Australia.

"Throughout New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, the external organization of the aborigines bears the stamp of different families, with such variations as the nature of the climate combined with other conditions influencing the human frame. In New South Wales where the heat promotes perspiration and renders bathing a luxury, the hair of the

natives is fine and glossy, the skin of a uniform colour, smooth and agreeable to the touch. In Van Diemen's Land which is cold, wet, and liable to sudden changes of temperature, where bathing ceases to be a pleasure and the body is subject to checked perspiration, the skin appears scaly, spotted by cutaneous disease and weather-beaten. The hair, a prey to filthiness, is subject to the anointing of the head with a mixture of clay, red ochre and fish grease in order to ward off vermin.

"Generally speaking, the colour of all races is an earthy black. The stature of the male ranges between four feet six and five feet six inches. The head is small, the trunk slender, the breast arched and well developed and the arms and legs of a rounded and muscular form. The hair is generally black, rough, lank and coarse. With some however it is soft and curling, while with others it is woolly, similar to the African.

"The face, characteristic feature of the race, presents a facial angle of between 75° and 85°. It is marked by a low forehead, eyes large and far apart and half covered by the upper lid, with a conjunctiva of the purest white, spotted with yellow. The nose is broad and flat, the frontal sinuses being remarkably prominent, the nostrils extending and widespread. The mouth is wide with large white teeth and thick lips and the lower jaw unusually short.

"On the whole, the aboriginal possesses a well-proportioned frame. Compared with the negro he is swifter in his movements and in his gait more graceful. His agility, adroitness and flexibility when running, climbing or stalking his prey are more fully displayed. When beheld in the posture of striking or throwing his spear, his attitude leaves nothing to be desired in point of manly grace. But in his physical appearance he does not exhibit any features by which his race could be classed or identified with any of the known families of mankind.

"Their speech constitutes a highly sonorous and euphonious language. Its dictionary, so far as it has been compiled, is scanty and it seems that the dialects spoken in New Holland

are far from possessing those affinities from which a common root might be inferred.

"The nature of the religion and government of the Australian natives is as mysterious as the genesis of their language. One fact appears certain—they recognize a God though they never name him in their vernacular language but call him in English 'Great Master' and consider themselves his slaves.

"Neither the gift and privilege of life nor the means provided to maintain it excite in them the least feeling of obligation or gratitude. They consider the free gifts of Providence as no more than the duty of 'Great Master' to supply them with. They believe in an immortality or after-existence of everlasting enjoyment; and place its locality in the stars or other constellations of which they have a perfect knowledge. They do not dread the Deity. All their fears are reserved for the evil spirit who counteracts the doings of the 'Great Master' and consequently it is to the evil spirit that their religious worship is directed.

"There are three distinct classes or social gradations observed among them. These are attained through age and fidelity to the tribe. It is only the third class, the aged few, which is initiated into the details of the mysteries and which possesses the occult powers of regulating the affairs of the tribe. Great secrecy is usually maintained in the ceremonies of admitting the youth to the first class, and in raising those of the first to the second. This secrecy is most rigidly observed whenever an initiation into the third class takes place.

"One or two tribes usually attend the meetings of the first or second class but when those of the third are called, the tribes within seventy miles assemble. On these occasions, I was warned off and could not, without personal danger, approach nearer than ten miles to the spot.

"The foundation of their social edifice may, like that of civilized nations, be said to rest on the inherent sense of the rights of property. As strongly attached to that property as any European, the tribes of Australia resort to precisely similar measures for protecting it, and seek redress and

revenge for its violated laws through the same means as a European nation would, if similarly situated. Thus, if his territory has been trespassed upon in hunting by a neighbouring tribe, compensation or reparation is asked for. If such be refused, war ensues. When both tribes display equal force and courage, the feud is bequeathed to future generations. Every tribe is subdivided into families and each is regulated by the authority of the elders. The customs and ceremonies observed at births, marriages, sickness, funerals and festive meetings are independent of that authority. They are traditional and in point of etiquette are as rigorously adhered to as among civilized nations. Many of the superstitious practices connected with the rites of hospitality are closely allied to those which I noticed in the prairies of North America, among the Indians of South America and in some of the South Sea Islands. Their superstitious spirit watches eagerly the coming and passing of every event and not less eagerly seeks to draw intimations of the future. The mysterious belief in good or evil omen links the present and future of the aboriginal in one unbroken chain of anxieties, hopes, fears and anticipations. Amidst the monotony of existence, his life possesses elements of excitement in infinite variety, both painful and pleasurable.

"His poetry evinces the same activity and exuberance of imagination as his superstition. It is lyrical, wild and primitive, but Love, that most beautiful object and element of all poetry, is excluded from it. Mysticism and sometimes valour in combat but more frequently licentiousness and the praise of sensual gratification are his favourite themes. This poetry is never recited. It is sung and when once composed passes through all the tribes that speak the same language with remarkable rapidity.

"Migration, the chase, fishing and occasional war, alternated by feasting and lounging in the spots best adapted to repose, fill up the time of the aboriginal. The pangs and gnawings of ambition, avarice, discontent or weariness of life, the distress caused by oppression or persecution, the

maladies arising from the corrupt or artificial state of society are unknown to him.

"So also are the cares and anxieties of the arts, sciences and industry from all of which the physical condition of the country and the manifold provisions of a beneficent Providence have preserved him. That share of health and content which falls to his lot rewards him amply for his faithful adherence to the dictates of Nature.

"Few spectacles can be more gratifying to the philosopher than to behold the aboriginal in his as yet uninvaded haunts. Few can exhibit a more striking proof of the bountiful dispensation of the Creator than the existence of these people whose destiny, the singular presumption of the whites, in their attachment to conventional custom and worldly riches, has stigmatized and denounced as 'savage, debased, unfortunate, miserable'.

"To anyone who has taken off the trammels of a conventional, local and therefore narrow mode of thinking—to anyone who studies and surveys mankind in personal travels and by personal observation, it will appear evident that Providence has left as many roads to the threshold of contentment and happiness as there are races of mankind. When he beholds the calm, serene, mild yet lively countenance of the Australian aboriginal—his dance and song, those uncontrollable manifestations of attained felicity, he finds in the scene a corroboration of what otherwise a mere inference might have taught him to believe from the goodness and omniscience of the Creator.

"Placed by that Creator in perfect harmony with the whole economy of Nature, in his allotted dwelling and destiny, the aboriginal is seen procuring all that he wants, regulating all his social affairs and securing all the worldly happiness and enjoyment of which his condition is capable."

Such was the panegyric on the Australian aborigines written by the Count more than a century ago. Since his time, circumstances have changed, but this early anthropologist recorded in faithful detail the life and spirit of the aborigine in a manner which has not since been improved upon.

More detailed field studies have been made, and professional anthropologists have made numerous and scientific investigations of the habits and customs of the natives, but his description of their idyllic life and habits and customs remains as true today as when it was written.

Having contemplated the "noble savage" in his natural habitat, the Count turned to the second part of his essay on the aborigine, that dealing with the effect of white settlement in Australia on the tribes.

"The arrival of Europeans disturbed this happy economy. The hearths of the natives, like the wigwams of the American Indians, retreated or disappeared before the torrent of immigration.

"The manifold calamities but more particularly the decrease and final annihilation of the great majority of the indigenous races which has followed and always does follow the approach of the whites, is a fact of such historical notoriety that the melancholy instance of the Australian natives affords but a further corroboration of the fearfully destructive influence which the one race exercises upon the other.

"To me who, in my peregrinations out of Europe, have lived much among different races of aborigines—the natives of Canada, of the United States, California, Mexico, the South American Republics, Marquesas, Sandwich and Society Islands and finally those of New Zealand and Australia, have furnished observations which are here submitted.

"Examination of the oldest aborigines of any country including Australia render it evident that their longevity has not been abridged, that the rate of mortality has not increased *but that the power of continuing or procreating the species appears to have been curtailed.*

"On further enquiry, this curtailment of power was not found to originate with the male but seemed confined to the female alone. The most remarkable fact concerns the results of a union between an aboriginal female and a European male, an intercourse frequently brought about by local custom and notions and hospitality, or by the natural propensity

of the sexes. Whenever this takes place, the native female is found to lose the power of conception on a renewal of intercourse with the male of her own race, retaining only that of procreating with white men. Hundreds of instances of this fact are on record in my Memoranda, all tending to prove that the sterility of the female being relative only to one and not to another male—and recurring invariably among the Hurons, Seminoles, Red Indians, Araucos, South Sea Islanders and natives of New Zealand, New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land—is not accidental but follows laws as cogent though as mysterious as the rest of those connected with the generation of the species.

"To this cause of the decrease of the aborigines may be added others which though acting indirectly far surpass the evil consequences of the first as their agency extends still further, so as to occasion absolute sterility in the native female. Of these, the leucorrhoea, a general complaint raging with unusual severity, affords an extraordinary instance; not only because its character might be mistaken for secondary symptoms or a modified elephantiasis, but because its origin among the native women dates precisely from the arrival of the European females among them.

"Whatever the cause of the decrease and extinction of the aborigines may be, human interference to avert its melancholy consequence has been of no avail. A charter for Colonization granted to one race becomes virtually the decree for the extinction of the other.

"In New South Wales, since the fate of the aborigines awoke the sympathy of the public, neither the efforts of the missionary nor the enactments of the Government and still less the protectorate of the 'Protectors' have affected any good. The attempts to civilize and christianize the aborigines have utterly failed, though it is consolatory to confess that neither the one nor the other attempt has been carried into execution with the spirit which accords with its principles. The whole eastern country of New Holland, once thickly populated, may now said to be entirely abandoned to the whites with the exception of some scattered families and a

few straggling individuals. These, once so high-spirited, so jealous of their independence and liberty, are now treated with contempt and ridicule even by the lowest of the Europeans. Degraded, subdued, confused, awkward and distrustful, ill-concealing their emotions of anger, scorn and revenge, emaciated and covered with filthy rags, these native lords of the soil, more like spectres of the past than living men, drag on a melancholy existence to a yet more melancholy doom.

"In Van Diemen's Land, the drama of the destruction of the aborigines took another turn. In the course of colonization, the outcasts of society<sup>1</sup> occupying the more advanced and interior stations in the country, and accustomed to treat with contempt any rights which their brutal strength could bear down, invaded the natives' hunting grounds, seized on their women, and gave rise to that frightful system of bloody attacks and reprisals which provoked a general rise by both whites and blacks. It ended finally in the capture and transportation of the blacks in 1835 to Flinders' Island in Bass Strait.

"This severe, sanguinary but necessary measure was incumbent upon the Government in order to put an end to those solitary murders which began to belie the existence of civilization in the country.

"At the time of this deportation of the Van Diemen natives in 1835, their number amounted to 210. Visited by me in 1842, after an interval of seven years they mustered only fifty-four individuals. While each aboriginal family of New South Wales, in the interior of that land and uncontaminated by contact with the whites, swarms with children, those on Flinders Island had had during the seven years an accession of only fourteen infants."

After the departure of Strzelecki from Australia, the numbers of the Tasmanian aborigines swiftly declined. By the year 1847 only forty were left. Finally, the last sixteen survivors of the race were taken to Oyster Cove near Hobart,

1. Strzelecki was presumably referring not to the settlers and free immigrants but to the convicts and ticket-of-leave men.

where they were in contact with the whites and could obtain liquor. In 1869, before Strzelecki himself died, William Lanne, the last full-blooded Tasmanian male, died. In 1873, the year of Strzelecki's death, all the Tasmanians were dead except the sole survivor, a woman named Trucanini. She died in 1876, the last of her race, her skeleton being preserved in the Hobart Museum.

So passed the Tasmanians, whose decline made such an impression upon Strzelecki. They had existed in peace and quiet in their island home, cut off from the mainland, for many thousands of years. They were a distinct race of extraordinary anthropological interest but within only two generations of the coming of the white man they had wilted away and vanished, leaving scarce a trace of their origins, their paleolithic culture or their language.

In summing up his conclusions on the fate of the Australian aborigines, in his time, the Count wrote:

"Amidst the wreck of schemes, efforts and attempts to christianize, civilize, and preserve the aboriginal race, there remains yet to be adopted one measure, worthy of the liberality of the British Government.

"This is to listen and to attend to the last wishes of the departed and to the voice of the remaining few:

"'Leave us to our habits and customs. Do not embitter the days that are in store for us by constraining us to obey yours. Do not reproach us with apathy to that Civilization which is not destined for us. If you can still be generous to the conquered, relieve the hunger which drives us in despair to slaughter your flocks and the men who guard them.

"'Our fields and forests which once furnished us with abundance of vegetable and animal food, now yield us no more. They and their produce are yours.

"'You prosper on our native soil and we—are starving!'"