

Note on the aboriginal races of Australia : a paper read at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, held at York, September, 1864.

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NOTE
ON THE
ABORIGINAL RACES
OF
AUSTRALIA.

*(A Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Promotion
of Social Science, held at York, September, 1864.)*

BY
FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE.

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Note on the Aboriginal Races in Australia. By FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE.

AT the last meeting of the Association a paper of mine was read on the Sanitary Statistics of Colonial Schools and Hospitals. By the kindness of the Duke of Newcastle, copies of that paper were sent to all the colonies, and have called forth numerous communications of interest addressed to the Colonial Office. Mr. Cardwell has been good enough to place these papers at my disposal; and I now beg to lay before the Association extracts from two or three of the most important of those bearing on the fate of the aborigines of Australia.

The allusion made in my former paper to the Benedictine establishment of New Norcia has led to a long report from the Roman Catholic Bishop Salvado (of Port Victoria) on the practical working of this institution, containing points of considerable interest, strongly confirmative of the views advanced as to the general principles on which the natives should be trained.

Bishop Salvado combats the idea that the mortality among Aborigines is produced by diseases, simply as such. The considerations he adduces all lead to one conclusion, viz., that so soon as native habits and customs begin to undergo change under European influences, the work of destruction has at the same time begun. "Few sick aborigines," he says, "are restored to health," whereas, under similar circumstances, "few Europeans would die."

The native appears to have little or no chance of recovery from the moment he sets foot within a house or hospital and comes under medical treatment. He longs to return to the bush; he escapes; "and yet that dying native, a few weeks afterwards, when every one that knew him believed him to be dead and buried, is as strong and healthy as ever, having travelled perhaps fifty or more miles on foot."

The native dislike to hospitals is confirmed by a communication from Dr. Hale, our Bishop of Perth, in which he says:—

"As regards hospitals, I am sorry to say that it is so impossible to keep the poor natives (*i. e.*, the uncivilised natives) under any kind of restraint when they are sick—they so completely set at defiance all rules and regulations—that anything like regular hospital treatment is quite out of the question in their case. They are ready enough to take medicines and such other things as may be thought needful for them, but they will not tolerate restraint or confinement. Their unmanageableness in illness arises from a deeper feeling than that of mere restlessness. A positive and very strong dislike to any locality where they have been for some time sick takes possession of their minds, they persuade themselves that there must necessarily be some connection between the locality and their illness, and they are constantly haunted by the idea that they would be better almost anywhere else than where they are."

It would seem from this extract that the natives have an instinctive

dread of quiescence in one place. And this natural feeling is doubtless founded on some physiological law of their organisation.

A curious illustration of this instinct is mentioned by Bishop Salvado :

A native belonging to the institution became ill with spitting of blood : a sure mark of fatal disease, if the patient is treated in the usual way. The patient begged to be allowed to go into the bush ; and after three days' hunting of horses, he returned sufficiently recovered to resume his occupations.

Guided by experience of this class, Bishop Salvado has been led to conduct the institution at New Norcia upon the following principles, which I give in his own words (he "apologises" for his "foreign English") :—

"Having fixed my residence here in the year 1857, and admitted successively a good number of native boys, I thought and did establish for them three daily hours of light work in the morning, and three daily hours of school in the afternoon. I left free the other hours of the day for them to play, as necessary gymnastic exercises.

"My object in fixing them physical work has been threefold, viz., to prevent sickness by the daily development of their exercised body and strength; to have them busy in doing some useful thing; and to introduce them by degrees into the habits of civilised and industrial life. Although I acknowledged the great advantages of mental work by fixing a certain time for their school, including religious instruction, I greatly feared the deathful consequences of indoor restraint.

"We ought to bear in mind that the aborigines are exotic or foreigners to our civilisation. They cannot stand at once, not even our food, much less our daily hard work, let it be mental or physical. For this reason I have always been rather indulgent in the exact keeping of their hours of school or work. In ploughing, shearing, and reaping seasons I dispense them of their school, and every one of them, according to their age and capabilities, is employed in the general work of the season. Indeed, the work of most of them is no other thing than a continual childish playwork, but it is by playing that they learn by degrees how to work.

"Of the two works, viz., physical and mental, I have given the preference to the former; for, according to my own ideas, a native that knows how to cultivate his field, I believe him to be much more advantageously initiated in the civilised life than another that knows how to read and write.

"I have seen aborigines, males and females, read and write quite correct as I thought, yet they were nothing better for it. Reading and writing are things utterly useless to them as far as their living is concerned, for not to starve they are obliged to return to the bush to live by hunting as their forefathers did. We look at them with European eyes; consider them as Europeans, and try to train them as such, but in doing so we delude ourselves. Their case is quite another, quite different from ours, and we ought to bring them to our case and high position not at once, but by the same way we came to it, by degrees.

"Physical work, as ploughing and so forth, will bring them the means of their living; mental work, as reading and writing, will bring them, what we have many a time seen, vices and debauchery. There are many things that in theory are really beautiful, yet cannot bear to be put in practice.

"There is an establishment, I will say, for the sake of argument, where one hundred or more aborigines have been well and highly educated, in fact every one of them is a good Christian and a good scholar. Their schooling time is over, and then what? Are they to remain all their life's time in that establishment? Are they to be supported always and in all their wants by that establishment? If this neither can be nor is intended by the rules of that establishment, can they support themselves, and perhaps their wives and children, by their learning when out of that establishment? Once out of that establishment

where will they go? What will they do? All these questions have already been answered by the fact that all the time, trouble, and expenses in having brought them to that state of civilisation did them no good, all has been lost; for those aborigines, having no means of support, become the worst specimens of their race.

"I am well aware that when a Mr. Anybody sees the aborigines of such or such school read well their lessons, write clear their copy-books, and sing in good time certain favourite songs, he remains highly gratified, and everywhere he goes and to every one he speaks, he praises it to the skies. He and all will applaud it as a true blessing, never dreaming that the whole of it will have no good result at all, and all will disappear as the smoke before a strong current of wind. That gentleman thought he was seeing all this in a school of European children, but he was mistaken, as well as in all he thought would follow it.

"As a principle, I think that in civilising the aborigines of Australia the learning of the A B C, &c, ought to be a secondary thing; religious instruction and physical work, both at the same time, ought to take the first and leading place.

"I will make a hypothesis and suppose an establishment where the aborigines are daily and practically instructed in religious matters, and gradually trained in the doings of a well-directed farm. Their daily school is not long, neither is their daily work, yet the latter is encouraged by all means, and the aborigines are paid for it. In many cases, and perhaps in most of them, their work and the benefit of it do not cover the expenses of their support; nevertheless, they are rewarded for it, and faithfully.

"The aborigines, seeing the real and positive advantage they are getting for their work, will exert themselves the more, and thus by degrees they will become acquainted with the various branches and different works of a farm. They are trained in everything save in minding sheep, cattle, pigs, or goats, which thing does no good to them. Even tailoring, shoemaking, and similar trades are considered too sedentary and unwholesome for them; nevertheless, if any of them has an inclination to be a shoemaker or to learn any other trade, he is allowed to follow it. But, as a general rule, they are trained in the branches of agriculture.

"When any of them gets to be of a proper age and sufficiently instructed to cultivate by himself a field, a parcel of land is apportioned to him for that purpose. That land is to be cleared by himself, the other natives helping him, for which work the establishment pays them. It pays also somebody else for the rooting out of large trees and old stumps; for that work is considered too hard and even injurious to the health of the aborigines; pays as well for the fencing of the land, and thus the land is ready for the plough at the expenses of the establishment. At ploughing season that native being supplied by the same establishment with a team, plough, seed, harrow, and other necessaries, he ploughs that parcel of land or part of it.

"At the latter end of November our native is reaping the wheat of his field, and as cheerful as any man can be. The other natives are paid by the establishment for helping him; the native owner of the field is not paid for his reaping, nor has he been paid for his ploughing; he is not paid for any work he does for himself, but he is supported and supplied with everything he may be wanting at those times.

"The crop of the field is respected as his property, but it is also well understood that whatsoever money that crop will produce to him, that money shall be employed in buying tools and utensils of agriculture; and if those means are enough, a bullock or more are to be bought. Of the money he receives as wages for the works he does at the establishment he may dispose at his pleasure, although he is often advised to employ it usefully.

"If he is a single or unmarried man, the establishment provides him with a cottage at its own expenses, but he had been provided with it before that time if married.

"Should the single native find any of the girls at the same establishment willing to become his partner, they, supposing them both well instructed in their Christian religious duties, will be married. If there is no girl at the establishment or none of them is willing to marry him, then he may obtain any from out the establishment, and when instructed and baptised he may marry her.

"That native once married, the establishment supports him, as before, his wife and children (if they have any) for some time, perhaps for two or three years, and then by degrees the means of the establishment are shortened to him in due proportion to the increase of his own means.

"The children of that native, or natives, as the case may be, will be a great step further advanced in civilisation than their parents were at their age. They will have a better chance of having from their early days a good Christian and civil education, and the children of those children will be further advanced still.

"Thus by means of practical religious and physical work, education together with but little school in the beginning, and over all by the blessing of the Almighty, in the course of time a village of industrial small farmers and good Christians will be gradually formed.

"To this hypothesis it may be said that after all there is no more in it than a theory. Indeed it is a theory, but such that the fathers of our grandfathers by putting it into practice have fully demonstrated to have been the medium, and the high road by which they reached to their high state of civilisation, and even ourselves to the enjoyment of that we have the happiness to possess at present.

"After religion, I believe reading, writing, and what follows it, to be, to the already civilised people, one of the greatest, if not the greatest blessing of civilisation, but I do not think it to be so in the case of savages or uncivilised people, as the aborigines of Australia are. Nature itself teaches us that the first thing a newly-born child looks after is the breast of its mother, and no man can make use of his mental or intellectual faculties if he has not the necessary physical powers to enable him to do it.

"It would be, perhaps, not out of place to add that even to the most of civilised people who do write, their pen is their plough, their ink their seed, and their paper their field. Very few indeed are those whose thought, and not whose ink is their seed; in fact, the more get their living by the plough, and the privileged (exceedingly) few by the thought.

"Anyhow that theory has regulated my operations here, and that hypothesis is nothing else but the same theory put here into practice, in order to attain our charitable and heartily wished-for-end, viz., the conversion and civilisation of the aborigines of this province.

"There are already better than eighteen years since I first came to this colony, but only seven since it has been my privilege to begin this benevolent work in my own way. For nearly the first four years (out of seven), the whole system worked well; at the latter end of the fourth year, the measles and its consequences were a great drawback to our efforts, nevertheless we continued exerting ourselves, and I have no reason to complain of the general result.

"A period of seven years is rather too short to expect in it great things from a work and system depending on the age of children. We had several young natives able already to work for themselves when the measles decimated them, but at present of 33 native boys and girls we have with us, four young men only are able to plough for themselves, and their joined crop yielded, this year, 200 bushels of wheat save 10.

"They themselves alone, ploughed the ground, threw the seed, harrowed the field, and at the proper season reaped materially the fruit of their hard labour.

"Self-interest is the oil that makes every wheel go. Take away self-interest, and not one will move; for nothing is done for nothing.

"Surely, if the aborigines are left to themselves, they cannot but follow their forefathers' traditions and customs, but if properly and timely trained, I, for one, do not see the impossibility of their being truly civilised. A great deal depends, there is no doubt, I think, on the system adopted, and on the way and manner of carrying that system out. The experience of many past years has taught us that the time, labour, and expense of civilising the aborigines of Australia by only teaching them how to read, to write, &c. &c., has been as yet an unfortunate failure. I have no doubt that neither want of zeal nor of means have been the cause of it, therefore it must lie in the system adopted. It seems to me that the physical work system as adopted in this Benedictine mission answers better, the practical result of it shows this, although in a short time, and on a small scale. I regret not being able to carry it out on a larger scale, but the simple reason is no

other than our scanty means or private income. I thankfully acknowledge in this place, in justice and with gratitude to the colonial government, their helping us in our charitable work these three years with £100 sterling per annum.

“An enterprise of this magnitude cannot be properly carried out, even on our small scale, without incurring great expenses (and I know it too well), but, after all, the conversion and regeneration of man is not the work of man alone.

“We generally do select the best means as the medium for the better and surer attainment of our ends; but in the conversion of man, not the medium of that system, nor the other; not the scanty means nor the ample ones; not the management of that man nor of the other can alone succeed, for ‘neque qui plantat est aliquid neque qui rigat; sed qui incrementum dat Deus,’ ‘neither he that planteth is anything, nor he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.’

“Nevertheless, if we in such a charitable work comport ourselves as ‘God’s coadjutors,’ and if as such we persevere in doing our best, every one of us ‘shall receive his own reward, according to his labour.’”

I have introduced this somewhat lengthy abstract from Bishop Salvado’s paper, because it explains the method of civilising adopted by him,—and which in his former communication, cited in my last paper, he stated had been successful in training the aborigines without destroying them. The method employed pre-supposes the possession of considerable capabilities on the part of the native population. But the direction given to these is more towards physical improvement and introduction of better physical and moral habits, than towards mere head-knowledge.

In dealing with uncivilised races, it has hitherto been too often the case that the Roman Catholic Missionary has believed: “Sprinkle this child with holy water; and then, the sooner it dies the better:”—that the Protestant Missionary has believed: “Make this child capable of understanding the truths of religion, and then our work is done.”

But the wiser Missionary of this day says: “What is the use of reading and writing to the natives,—it does not give him a living. Show him his duty to God. And teach him how to plough.”

Otherwise, he does but fall into vice, worse than before.

Ceres comes before Minerva.

As for the Australians, in their present state, very few of the human race are lower in the scale of civilisation than these poor people: excepting indeed, those who trample upon and oppress them,—who introduce among them the vices of European (so-called) civilisation.

What must be the condition of a people of whom an English lady,* conducting a native school, can write, as she does to me:—

“There is not in nature, I think, a more filthy, loathsome, revolting creature than a native woman in her wild state. Every animal has something to recommend it; but a native woman is altogether unlovable.”

And yet the daughters of these degraded women can give examples, like the following, cited in the same letter:—

“Bessy, the girl, has just commenced to play the harmonium in church, a

* Mrs. Camfield, of Annesfield, King George’s Sound, Western Australia.

superior instrument with two key boards (Alexandre's), and it is very gratifying to hear her, she plays so well, and with such coolness and composure, and not with any idea that she is doing what I suppose was never done before by an Australian native. She is very simple-minded, but quite equal in knowledge and intelligence to an English girl, who has not had greater advantages."

It is an advantage of an Association, such as this, that it enables difficult social problems to be subjected to discussion, and public opinion to be brought to bear on abuses which would not perhaps be otherwise reached. The voluminous papers, of which I have given a few extracts, are the first fruits of last year's discussion—by making them public, further good will ensue. This question of the fate of aboriginal populations is one closely concerning our national honour, and every day enhances its importance. I cannot better conclude, in the way of application, than with the following words from Bishop Hale's paper, already cited:—

"Upon the Australian races European civilisation (Christian in name, but far from Christian in reality) has come suddenly and with overwhelming force. It has found them utterly unable to hold their own against it, equally incapable of joining with and flowing onward with the advancing tide; and therefore these races have been, since the contact first took place, and still are, going down before and beneath its, to them, destructive progress.

"If their condition had been less degraded, or if the tone of our civilisation had been less overbearing, self-seeking, and oppressive, or even if the irruption of the one upon the other had been less sudden and less violent, the result might have been different. But it is vain to speculate upon what might have been; we know, too well unhappily, what has been taking place, steadily and surely, from the moment when Europeans first set foot upon the Australian continent until this present time. The native races sink down and perish at our presence."

Here we have the undoubted fact graphically described. The only question is, whether Bishop Salvado's plan of training the children of the disappearing race will save the race. His method is founded on sound physiological principles; and being so, is one of the most likely to succeed.