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The Mental Characteristics of Primitive Man, as Exemplified by the Australian Aborigines  
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Mr. CHARLESWORTH exhibited an obsidian flake and core from Mexico ; and an Aztec mirror in iron pyrites.

The following paper was read :

VI.—*The MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS of PRIMITIVE MAN, as exemplified by the AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.* By C. STANILAND WAKE, Esq., Dir. A.I.

In a former paper, I endeavoured to trace the most prominent physical characters of the aborigines of Australia. In the present one, I intend to refer to the more striking intellectual and moral characteristics of this peculiar race. My object in thus doing is a double one. I wish, primarily, to establish what are the real mental phenomena exhibited by the natives of Australia ; and secondarily, to show approximately the condition in which man generally must have existed in the primeval ages, not necessarily when he first appeared on the earth, but so soon as the struggle for existence between man and man commenced, and the selfish instincts of humanity had had time to become fully developed.

The mental characteristics naturally divide themselves into those intellectual and those moral. To speak, however, of intellectual phenomena in relation to the Australian aborigines is somewhat of a misnomer. This race presents, in fact, hardly any of what are usually understood as the phenomena of intellect. Nor could it be otherwise with savages who, almost without clothing or ornaments, with few implements or manufactures, and with very inferior habitations and means of water-locomotion, have no aim in life but the continuance of their existence and the gratification of their passions, with the least possible trouble to themselves. When, therefore, I speak of intellectuality, I refer to that simple activity of the mind which is necessary to the performance of the actions required for the maintenance of life, and for the display of those simple phenomena, almost instinctive, nevertheless, in their nature, which may be supposed to result from the reflective exercise of the human mind on external objects, as distinguished from the merely instinctive thought of the animal. What I thus describe as the intellectual phenomena of the Australian aborigines are few, and have relation only to the exigencies of social life. The ingenuity displayed by them in overcoming the many difficulties they have to contend against in dealing with the hard conditions of nature is often, no doubt, very great. Their appliances are, however, often temporary, although not always so, as may be seen from their use of nets for fishing and bird-catching ; these being well made, as are generally also their baskets, bags, and mats. Great

ingenuity is, moreover, undoubtedly shown in the native weapons; one of which—the boomerang—would appear to be unknown, in principle at least, to any other race. It must be noted, however, that we do not know the progressive stages through which the boomerang has arrived at its present perfection, and that its origin, like that of fire-making, may have been in the accidental recognition of an operation of nature.

The skill of the aborigines is well displayed in the well-sinking, so many examples of which Sir George Grey found in North-Western Australia, near the Hutt River. Mr. Eyre also met with similar constructions in his journey from Adelaide to King George's Sound. Of those near Smoky Bay he says: "These singular wells, although sunk through a loose sand to a depth of fourteen or fifteen feet, were only about two feet in diameter at the bore, quite circular, carried straight down, and the work beautifully executed." The natives could reach the water only by means of a pole placed against the side of the well, and its use required the greatest care lest the sand should fall in.

In some respects, the drawings and paintings which have been found in various parts of Australia are the most interesting phenomena presented by the native intellect. The cave paintings discovered by Sir George Grey are too well known to require description here; and the same may be said of the drawings on Clark's Island, near Cape Flinders, seen by Mr. Cunningham.

Mr. Collins long ago stated that most of the implements used by the natives of Port Jackson "are ornamented with rude carved work, effected with a piece of broken shell." He adds that on the rocks he had seen "various figures of fish, clubs, swords, animals, and even branches of trees, not contemptibly represented." It will not be pretended that any of the native drawings furnish evidence of great artistic skill. They may occasionally exhibit a certain amount of rude vigour, but as a rule they may be classed with the productions of children. As to most of them, moreover, the natives assert that they know nothing as to their origin; and this we may well believe, when, as Mr. Oldfield states, they cannot distinguish the picture of a man from that of any other object, unless all the lesser parts, such as the head, etc., are much exaggerated.

The activity of the Australian intellect may be supposed by some persons to be shown in the system of marriage restrictions, which appears to be in operation, more or less, throughout nearly the whole continent. These restrictions, or the rules which enforce them, must not be viewed, however, as having been arbitrarily formed for some special and foreseen purpose. They have, undoubtedly, grown up out of an earlier social phase. The same

must be said of language. This is not the creation of intellect ; and, therefore, the complexity of its structure, the richness of its grammatical forms, or the copiousness of its vocabulary, affords no proof of great intellect, although they show considerable mental activity.

The aborigines have no system of government, and no chief, in the usual acceptation of that word. Admiral Wilkes, of the United States Exploring Expedition, in referring to this point, states that the universal reprobation of their associates, which follows a breach of ancient customs, has a strong tendency to preserve a strict observance of them. The same thing is said by all other writers who have referred to the subject, and nothing more conclusively shows the low mental position occupied by the Australian aborigines, when taken in connection with the barbarity or absurdity of most of the customs thus enforced.

It is true that Sir Thomas Mitchell says of the aborigines : "They have been described as the lowest in the scale of humanity, yet I found those who accompanied me superior in penetration and judgment to the white men composing my party. Their means of subsistence and their habits are both extremely simple ; but they are adjusted with admirable fitness to the few resources afforded by such a country in a wild state." This testimony is doubtless true ; but the facts it proves are quite consistent with the low position I have assigned to the Australian aborigines, a position which their moral defects, as detailed by Sir Thomas Mitchell himself, and by other writers, requires for them.

*Moral Character.*—Collins said of the natives of New South Wales that they were great thieves, even stealing objects of which they could not know the use ; that they were "adepts in the arts of evasion and lying" ; that they were revengeful, jealous, courageous, and cunning ; that they displayed great talent for mimicry ; and that they were susceptible, notwithstanding their other defects, of friendship, and capable of sorrow, although this was with them a very transient emotion. On the other hand, Mr. Eyre says of the natives of South Australia with whom he came into contact, that they are frank, open, and confiding, and that they are easily made friends, and then associate with strangers with perfect freedom and fearlessness. It must not be thought, however, that Mr. Eyre found the natives of South Australia to be without social failings. The very persons whom he describes as being so affectionate with each other and with their children are just the reverse with their wives.

We shall see hereafter how heartless is the treatment of the native women ; and this conduct in relation to their own people renders less improbable the statement of Sir Thomas Mitchell,

that when he reached the Goulbourn River (Port Phillip) he was at length convinced "that no kindness had the slightest effect in altering the disposition and savage desire of these wild men to kill white strangers, on their first coming among them." This undoubtedly betokens a very low condition of the moral nature, which is no less shown by reference to many of the native customs. Thus, Sir George Grey says that in practice the aborigines reject "all idea of the equality of persons or classes. The whole tendency of their superstitions and traditional regulations, is to produce the effect of depriving certain classes of benefits which are enjoyed by others." The favoured classes are the old or the strong, who obtain their advantages at the expense of the female sex, the young, and the weak, who are condemned to "a hopeless state of degradation".

We see in these laws and customs, which underlie the very constitution of Australian aboriginal society, the operation of that "unmitigated selfishness" which Mr. Gideon Lang declared to be the disposition of at least all the male natives. The only inference that can be made from this fact, and from certain other phenomena, mental and social, to be shortly mentioned, is that moral ideas have in the case of the Australian aborigines remained almost wholly undeveloped. This is shown by nothing better than the slight regard paid among them to female chastity. Thus, Collins said of the natives of New South Wales that chastity was not a virtue on which the women prided themselves, although they appeared sometimes to learn to be ashamed of its infraction while in the presence of white people. The testimony of Mr. Eyre is still stronger, if possible, to the same effect. He says that no such virtue as chastity appears to be recognised, women prostituting themselves freely throughout their whole lives. Mr. Eyre adds other particulars in a Latin note. Thus, he says that among many tribes it is customary for the youth of both sexes to lie indiscriminately together, this first taking place when the boys are thirteen or fourteen, and the girls ten years of age.

In the presence of such an entire want of the idea of personal purity as these facts reveal—facts which agree perfectly with the statements made by travellers in other parts of the Australian continent of the slight value set by husbands on the chastity of their wives, and with the general character ascribed, as we shall see, to the native women—there can be no wonder that infanticide and abortion are very common.

The want of natural affection exhibited in these customs is shown in other ways. Thus, Mr. Eyre asserts that, when ill, a wife is sometimes left to die, if the tribe is removing to another locality, and "parents are treated in the same manner when

helpless and infirm." It should be added, however, on the testimony of Mr. Oldfield, that among the Western Australians great care is taken of the blind, deaf, dumb, halt, and withered, by their comrades. Wilkes tells us that, so far as his observation went, the women appeared to care little for their children. This may, however, have been defective observation, or, at all events, the conduct he noticed is consistent with the existence of the feeling contrary to that suggested by Admiral Wilkes.

In the West, also, the mother would seem to have a real affection for her offspring, although there, too, it sometimes has curious accompaniments. Mr. Oldfield, when speaking of cannibalism among the natives generally, says that a man will, in case of extremity, kill his child to satisfy his hunger. In these cases, "the mother is not permitted to make loud lamentation, else she is beaten; she may, however, express her grief by uttering low, stifled moans, but how great soever her sorrow for the loss of her child may be, it becomes somewhat assuaged when the head of the victim, the mother's legal perquisite in all such cases, is thrown to her, and this she proceeds to eat, sobbing the while." It is only fair to record, as a set-off against the facts above stated, that Mr. Eyre indignantly protests against those who represent the Australian native as being entirely wanting in natural affection.

How are we to reconcile the apparent inconsistency between the display of affectionate emotion recorded by Mr. Eyre, and the treatment of the native women? In South Australia, the women are frequently much ill-treated by their husbands or friends, being "beaten about the head, with waddies, in the most dreadful manner, or speared in the limbs for the most trivial offences." The woman is, in fact, the slave of the man. Collins makes this remark of the natives of New South Wales; and Wilkes confirms him in his statement of the cruel treatment their women receive, the waddy being "applied to their heads in a most unmerciful manner." Woman appears, in fact, to be treated as a dog, and no one will take her part, even though she really be innocent of that for which she is punished. A man, adds Sir George Grey, may even beat the wife of another without retaliation on himself, but his own wife may expect in her turn to receive a beating at the hands of the husband of the woman first maltreated. Mr. Oldfield says "that it is remarkable" as showing the low estimation in which the female is held by all the Australian aborigines, "that none of the dreaded In-gnas are of that sex, and from this and other considerations we may infer that the New Hollanders do not believe that the women possess souls."

We cannot be surprised that, considering their unenviable

position, and the fact that the old men usually secure them for themselves, the younger females are much given to intrigue, and they are quite willing to run the risk of a spear through the calf of the leg, or even a more severe punishment, at the hand of their husbands. The character of the native woman, however, does not appear to be such as to secure her much sympathy. Sir George Grey states that "the ferocity of the women, when they are excited, exceeds that of the men; they deal dreadful blows at one another with their long sticks; and if ever the husband is about to spear or beat one of his wives, the others are certain to set on her, and treat her with great inhumanity." The old wives are extremely jealous of the young ones. The women, moreover, are not without influence in the tribe. The old ones often incite the men to acts of revenge; and when once an old woman begins a chanting address of this kind, "nothing but complete exhaustion induces her to stop, and the instant she pauses another takes up the burden of the song. The effect some of them produce upon the assembled men is very great; in fact, these addresses of the old women are the cause of most of the disturbances which take place."

The various facts hitherto detailed are explainable only on the assumption that the natives of Australia are, in all questions of morality, and in all matters connected with the emotional nature, mere children. There may occasionally be great display of affection, and this, as in the case of women who have lost their young children, may sometimes last for a considerable period, but, however intense the emotion, it is not, as a rule, of long continuance. The very affection for children, which is the chief redeeming feature in the character of the Australian native, is carried so far as to amount to a weakness. The children are seldom, if ever, corrected, and the boys soon become utterly regardless of their mothers, and often tyrannise over them. It is, however, by the nature of their general ideas of morality that the true condition of this people must be determined, and, judged of by this test, such condition must be of a very childish character. They have, undoubtedly, the simple notion of a distinction between right and wrong; but we shall not be incorrect if we affirm that it is founded altogether on the rights of property. This is evident from the ideas entertained as to theft. To take that which belongs to another native is, no doubt, considered a great crime, for it interferes with the rights of property. To steal from a white man is, however, very different, and, with few exceptions, the tribes met with throughout the whole continent appear to be dexterous thieves.

That the native notions of morality are founded on the rights of property is shown by other considerations. Thus, the natives



see nothing morally wrong in adultery, as is shown by their readiness to lend their wives to their friends, and by the custom of women married to old men having young lovers, a practice which Mr. Oldfield thinks is winked at by their husbands. The men can, however, be very jealous, and the recognised punishment for the stealing or running-off with another man's wife is either spearing in the calf of the leg, or standing to receive the spears of the offended tribe with only a shield as a safeguard, which, however, if the culprit be dexterous, will protect him from injury. The woman is dealt with at the discretion of her husband, and sometimes, says Oldfield, "she is delivered up to the tender mercies of the other women of the tribe, who, seizing and throwing her down, sit upon her body, which they scarify in a dreadful manner with sharp flints." Thus, the property interfered with is generally more severely punished than the man who appropriates it.

There seems, indeed, to be an almost total absence from the mind of the Australian native of any idea of abstract morality, or even true instinct of moral propriety. The immaturity of nature which this fact shows is revealed also by the superstitious notions with which the native mind is saturated. It is not necessary for me to enter into particulars of the many curious superstitions which show the low moral condition of the Australian aborigines. Many of these are connected with the belief in the existence of spirits, such a belief, which is evidence of some notion of a future life, being universal. The idea of a future life associated with it is, however, very indefinite, and has had a negative origin. The savage cannot form any idea of death, and, therefore, he supposes the dead still to exist, and he sees their activity in various operations of nature which affect him more or less injuriously. It is very improbable, however, that the Australian native ever really thinks on the subject; his actions in relation to which are governed by mere traditional instinct. His notions as to the existence of a Great Being have arisen, no doubt, from the belief in the In-gnas, or shades of the dead. Dr. Lang is certainly right when, in opposition to Strzelecki, he affirmed that the Australian aborigines do not recognise a God. They have nothing whatever, says Dr. Lang, of the character of religion, nor is there any trace among them of idolatry.

The opinion that the Australian aborigines are still but children in their general mental development is quite consistent with certain other phenomena, which may be shortly referred to. Thus Wilkes says of the natives of New South Wales: "They are not great talkers, but are usually silent and reserved; they are generally well disposed, but dislike to be much spoken to, particularly in a tone of raillery." Wilkes adds, "their great



timidity has caused a false estimate to be put upon their character, by ascribing to it great ferocity." The furious onsets made by strange natives on parties of white men, "arise from the panic with which they are seized depriving them temporarily of reason." Like children, in fact, they are afraid of the ghosts which they conjure up, although in the present case those which the Australian fears take the substantial form of white Europeans. The seemingly ferocious conduct of the natives may be explained partly by reference to timidity and partly by their belief that the white man has returned to claim his property, or at least that he wishes to appropriate that of the tribe. This belief is probably the real explanation of the unfriendly opposition usually met with by travellers in the interior, pleasant exceptions to the rule being furnished by the natives who assisted Leichhardt near Port Essington, and by those who supplied Mr. Eyre with water during his persevering struggle to reach King George's Sound, round the head of the Great Bight. The deceitful conduct of which so many travellers complain, and which led Commander Stokes to say of the Australian aborigines that, "like all savages, they are treacherous" (Leichhardt, however, limiting the assertion to the coast blacks), is often due to another cause. Stokes does, indeed, say of the natives of the north-west coast that they are generally "suspicious rather than treacherous." The latter quality, however, results from the former, and it is suspicion, doubtless, which sometimes leads to actions which appear otherwise to be inexplicable. The custom found among all the tribes, apparently, of concealing spears in the grass and drawing them along the ground with the toes, is evidence of the combination in the native character of both cunning and suspicion, at least, if not of treacherous feeling. I cannot help thinking, nevertheless, that the difference in the reception experienced by various travellers at the hands of the natives has in great measure a *personal* origin. The savage, as the child, instinctively likes or dislikes a stranger, and hence when one person may be violently repulsed another will be welcomed by him, until his latent suspicions are brought into active operation through some ill-judged act of his visitor.

One other characteristic of the Australian aborigines deserves to be mentioned: it is the power which grimaces have over them. Captain King says that friendly terms were renewed with the Cape Flinders tribe chiefly by means of grimaces and ridiculous gestures, which, he adds, are "always acceptable to the natives of this part of the world." Com. Stokes made the same discovery when exploring Clarence Strait, where two of his companions escaped spearing only by dancing and making grimaces for a considerable period, until the attention of their ene-

mies was diverted elsewhere. A like mental phase is exhibited in the power of mimicry which the natives possess in a high degree. I may remark that these characteristics are consistent with the talkative and merry nature noticed by many travellers, especially among the young natives, and with the universal love of what they know as music, singing, and dancing.

To sum up what has gone before, it is evident that the aborigines of Australia, as compared with the races who have made further progress in mental culture, are yet in the condition of children. Among all the tribes, whether the more hostile ones of the east, or those which in the west appear to give evidence of a milder disposition, there is the same imperfect development of moral ideas. In fact, none of them have any notion of what we call morality, beyond the simple one of right and wrong arising out of questions of property. With this moral imperfection, however, the Australian natives exhibit a degree of mental activity which, at first sight, may be thought inconsistent with the childish position here assigned to them. It is evident, however, that this activity results from the position in which the Australian is placed. Extremely indolent when food is plentiful, when it is scarce the greatest exertions can be made for its acquirement, and the repeated exercise of the mind on the means of accomplishing the all-important end of obtaining food has led to a development of the lower intellectual faculties, somewhat disproportionate to the moral ideas with which they are associated. Probably, it is a result of the undue mental activity thus shown that idiocy is common among the natives when old age is reached, although not among the young. Another consequence is seen in the proud independence exhibited among many of the tribes, which often gives them an air of haughtiness and insolence.

In view of the facts I have stated, how is it possible to assert that this race has degenerated from a higher state of civilisation? And yet this is the position taken by some writers. So far, however, as I can judge, the phenomena referred to in the present paper are utterly inconsistent with the degradation supposed. The negative evidence furnished by the absence of many things possessed by other barbarous peoples, showing such a deficiency in the conveniences of social life, seems to me to be a sufficient refutation of such an opinion. That the Australian aborigines do possess certain points of affinity with other races is unquestionable, and I think it is extremely probable that the inquiries of Dr. Bleek point in a right direction. They do not, however, prove that the Australians have fallen from a higher state of civilisation, or that, as a race, they have been derived either from Southern India or from Northern Asia. The facts

which appear to support such a notion as this are explainable on the assumption, which may, I believe, be supported by physical data, that the Australians are more or less a mixed people. Probably long before the establishment of the Chinese Empire there was a great movement of Asiatic peoples, the so-called Scythic element, which spread throughout the Indian peninsula, and reached Southern Africa on the one side of the Indian Ocean and Australia on the other. Nowhere, except perhaps in the Indo-Chinese peninsula, was this Scythic element so powerful as to destroy or to absorb the native element, and in Australia especially its influence was comparatively weak, since it reached that continent already diluted by contact with the so-called Malay peoples.

It is very questionable, moreover, whether the Scythic element exhibited much superiority in mental culture over the native one by which it has been absorbed. It certainly has not sufficed to raise the Australian aborigines from their primitive barbarism, the phenomena presented by which are quite inconsistent with the idea that they have fallen from a higher state of civilisation. A race, whatever degradation it may undergo, could never lose all trace in its social condition of that which it once possessed, and sink back to the exact state in which it must have been when it first emerged from a condition of almost absolute barbarity. This, morally at least, is the position of the aborigines of Australia; and the only conclusion, therefore, I can draw is, that they are something more than the race children of the present era—that, in fact, they represent the childhood of humanity itself, revealing to us the condition of mankind, if not in primeval times, yet when the original potentialities of man's being had been but slightly developed by the struggle for existence, and when, by the separation of families, opposing interests had been created, with their endless consequences of violence and bloodshed. This could not have been long after man's first appearance on the earth. Mr. Darwin seems to refer the origin of the several human races by sexual selection to the time when their progenitors had "only doubtfully attained the rank of manhood." "Man's ancestors would then," says Darwin, "have been governed more by their instincts, and even less by their reason, than are savages at the present day. They would not at that period have partially lost one of the strongest of all instincts, common to all the lower animals, namely, the love of their young offspring; and consequently they would not have practised infanticide. There would have been no artificial scarcity of women, and polyandry would not have been followed; there would have been no early betrothals; women would not have been valued as mere slaves." The practices thus condemned show themselves only as the intel-

lectual faculties are developed ; and as they agree well with the condition of the Australian aborigines, we may suppose that they represent one of the earliest stages in the progress of mankind towards that high culture which is exhibited by the European.

The following notes were taken as read :

VII.—NOTES on a COMPARATIVE TABLE of AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES. By the REV. GEORGE TAPLIN, Superintendent of the Native Industrial Settlement at Port Macleay, Lake Alexandrina, South Australia.

THIS table has been constructed so as to correspond as nearly as possible with the comparative table of Polynesian and Melanesian dialects found in Dr. George Turner's work, "Nineteen Years in Polynesia."

The sounds of the letters are adopted from the orthography recommended by the Royal Geographical Society. The consonants are to be sounded as in English, except that *g* is invariably hard. The vowels are to be sounded, for the most part, as in the following English words: *a* as in *father*; *e* as in *there, they*; *ei* has the sound of long *i*; *i* as in *fatigue*; *o* as in *old*; *ow* as in *cow, now*; *u* as in *rude*; and *oo* as in *moon*. *Y* is sometimes used for long *i*, as in *pyabed*; *ng* at the beginning of words is a common nasal sound in all Australian languages; *dl* and *ny* are also found at the beginning of words; *y* at the beginning of a word or syllable has a consonantal sound, as *yarra, goyarra*.

As this table has been compiled from various sources, I have endeavoured to get as much uniformity of sound as possible, and have altered the spelling for this purpose, where I felt warranted in doing so.

A singular uniformity will be observed in the words for *hand, eye, tongue, and blood*—especially the first three; and in a less degree for the word *mouth*. There is also a great uniformity in the word for *seeing*.

The personal pronouns exhibit great uniformity, with two remarkable exceptions; viz., the Port Phillip and Wimmera dialects.

Of course, I cannot speak positively of all the dialects; but those I have examined have led me to conceive it probable that in Australian languages the verb has only a participial form; for instance, that *tangulun ap* means *I standing*, and not the indicative *I stand*; that *mempin atte* means *by me striking*, and not *I strike*; and that *nakkir ap* means *I having seen*, and not *I saw*. I know this is the case with the language of the Narrinyeri tribes, because they are continually using the present tense as an adjective. The word *memp* means *strike* (im-