

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1881

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

Australian Aborigines: the Languages and Customs of several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia. By James Dawson. (Melbourne: Robertson; London: Macmillan and Co., 1881.)

MR. DAWSON, a settler of old standing in the district west of Melbourne, and his daughter, Mrs. Taylor, who has been familiar from childhood with several native dialects, have in years of careful inquiry collected the present volume of information as to the languages and life of the group of tribes living inland from the coast between Portland Bay and Cape Otway. These tribes form part of the native population described in the "Aborigines of Victoria," compiled by Mr. Brough Smyth for the Victorian Government; but able and extensive as that work is, the anthropologist sees on comparing it with the present volume how far he must still be from thoroughly understanding the native institutions, when a minute study of one district can bring out so many new and difficult points as are to be found here. Take the native marriage laws as set down by Mr. Dawson. The tribes are split up into totem-classes named after animals, both sons and daughters belonging to the mother's class, and not being allowed to marry within it; thus a Pelican youth may not marry a Pelican girl, or a Boa youth a Boa girl, but Pelican may marry Boa. So far, this is like the exogamous rules found in various other parts of the country; but here it is further stated that though the class follows the mother's side, the tribe itself follows the father's side, and the natives are not allowed to marry into their own tribe either, nor may a man marry into his mother's or grandmother's tribe, nor into an adjoining tribe, nor into one that speaks his own dialect. This remarkable set of restrictions, which does not seem to correspond exactly with those of any other district in the world, is considered by the tribes who live under it as intended to prevent marriage between those of "one flesh," and indeed it bars kin-marriage in both the male and female line in a more thorough way than the known laws of any other Australian tribes. No marriage or betrothal is permitted without the approval of the chiefs of each party, who first ascertain that no "illegal" relationship exists. Any symptoms of courtship between those of "one flesh" are put down by rough handling of the culprits, and parents are apt to save their children from breaking the law by betrothing them in proper quarters as soon as they can walk. What can have been the motive which led the ancestors of these savages to carry their prohibited degrees to an extent which our physicians would consider practically absurd? Mr. Dawson speaks of these laws as admirable, and plainly thinks them founded on practical reasons against marrying-in, for he says that where the prohibitions have been disregarded under European influence, the aborigines attribute to this disregard the greater weakness and unhealthiness of their children, and the increase of insanity. This, however, may have got into the native mind from hints by the white doctors, and the whole

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subject of these marriage-prohibitions is as yet an unsolved problem. This is better seen when one does not look at one particular point, but at the system as a whole, with its network of ceremonial regulations. Among these, the custom of avoiding the mother-in-law is of course described by Mr. Dawson. He gives the usual details how, when a girl is betrothed, her mother and aunts may not look at or speak to the man for the rest of his life, but if they meet him they squat down by the wayside and cover up their heads, and when he and they are obliged to speak in one another's presence, they use a peculiar lingo, which they call "turn-tongue." This queer dialect is not used for concealment, for everybody understands it, and some examples of it are here given which show that it has much in common with the ordinary language. Should the present notice meet the eye of Mr. Dawson, it may be suggested that it would be worth while to find out whether the "turn-tongue" is an old-fashioned dialect kept up for this ceremonial purpose. For the rest of the marriage-customs we must refer to the book itself; but to give an idea of the state of formality into which life has come among these supposed free-and-easy savages, mention may be made of the duties of the bridesmaid and groomsmen. When the married pair have been taken to the new hut built for them, for the next two moons the groomsmen and the husband sleep on one side of the fire, the bridesmaid and the wife on the other, the new-married couple not being allowed to speak to or look at one another. The bride is called a "not-look-round," and the pair in this embarrassing position are a standing joke to the young people living near, who amuse themselves by peeping in and laughing at them.

Among the interesting questions as to Australian arts and ideas which Mr. Dawson touches on, is whether they had any notion of boiling food. He confirms the general opinion that they had not, and states that there is no word meaning to boil in their native dialects. But it does not always follow that what is true as to one group of tribes is true everywhere. Mr. Brough Smyth gives an account of the fish-hooks of the aborigines in Victoria, but Mr. Dawson declares that in his district they were unknown, though the native fishermen have come so near angling as to use a rod and line with a bunch of worms for bait, with which they pull out the fish before he has time to disgorge. Looking over the grammatical part of the book, we find the list of numerals in the native dialects one of the most perfect examples of the way in which numerals have been developed from counting on the fingers. They say "one hand" for 5, "two hands" for 10, and so on with hands and twenties up to 100. But the unusual and noticeable point is, that though getting so far, they have not worked out words for the intermediate numbers above 10, but fall back on the primitive gestures; thus they have not words for 11 or 12, but they say 10, and hold out one finger or two to make up the number. Mr. Dawson seldom quotes or criticises books, but when he gives the fact that there is a native word for 100 he adds a note that this is wholly at variance with the statement made by Mr. E. B. Tylor ("Primitive Culture," vol. i. p. 220) as to some Australian tribes having no numeral words even so high as 5. To prevent misunderstanding he should have pointed out that the next page of the work in question makes reference to other

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Australian tribes reported to have numeral words up to 15 or 20. But the point raised is well worth attention. The statement as to tribes in various districts having no distinct numeral words above three, and only struggling on to four and five by saying "two-two," &c., rests on the authority of Europeans who have studied the native languages, sometimes well enough to write grammars of them. Are we to think that the natives generally had words for large numbers, and yet the Europeans failed to discover them? Or, rather, is it not easy to suppose that some tribes raised themselves (possibly since contact with the white man) above this low level of arithmetic, making, out of their counting on the fingers, numeral words even as high as the words here given for 100? It would be interesting if it could be shown etymologically that the terms here given for 20 and 100 had originally a material meaning, like the word for 5, which still means "hand."

One of the greatest difficulties in studying savages is to know how far to trust or distrust their assurances that what they tell is really their own, and not picked up from foreigners. From this point of view it is worth while to look closely at the story of the lost Pleiad, which here appears among the native myths of the "black-fellows." The author's friends naturally doubted its genuineness, but on further inquiry it was found to be widely known. The tradition is that the Pleiades were a chiefs called Gneecangar and her six attendants; Waa, the Crow (the star Canopus), fell in love with her, and finding that she and her women were going in search of white grubs, he turned himself into one, and bored into the trunk of a tree, where they were sure to find him. The women, one after another, poked their little wooden hooks into his hole, but he broke the points, till at last his love put in her beautiful bone hook, and he let her draw him out, whereupon he turned into a giant and ran away with her; since then only six Pleiads—the serving-women—have been left. Now between this story and our classical myths there is a difference. Ovid's version seems to carry its origin on its face, agreeing with the fact that only six of the stars in the cluster are bright and plain to common eyes, so the myth tells of a hidden or faint seventh. She is Merope hiding herself for shame at marrying a mortal, or Electra putting her hand before her eyes, not to see the ruin of Troy. But in the Australian tale the vanished star, being the queen, ought of course to be the brightest; so that there is little sense in the story, unless Mr. Dawson is prepared to maintain that the Australians remember a time when there was a Pleiad brighter than the rest, which has now vanished. It would be easier, if more commonplace, to guess that the natives got the idea of a lost Pleiad from some Englishman who had heard the story at home, but missed the point of it.

The anthropological work done by Mr. Dawson and Mrs. Taylor hardly needs praising. It is enough to point out how carefully, not relying on books, they have made their own inquiries on every subject, and recorded them as scientific material. It is to be hoped that they will not cease their researches, for there must still be much valuable evidence to be gleaned in their district, if it is done without delay.

EDWARD B. TYLOR

OUR BOOK SHELF

A Dictionary of Chemistry and Allied Sciences. By H. Watts, F.R.S. Third Supplement. Part II. (London: Longmans, 1881.)

WE have no publication in English strictly corresponding to *Liebig's Annalen* or the *Annales de Chimie et Physique*, and were it not for this now gigantic dictionary of chemistry by Mr. Watts many, both advanced and elementary students of our science, would find their labours considerably increased by the necessity of having to hunt up a great number of facts and records of work done in foreign journals. The chemical record in this volume includes discoveries made in 1880, and in addition a number of exhaustive articles by Professors Armstrong, on Isomerism; G. C. Foster, on Thermodynamics; Schuster, on the Spectrum; Thorpe, on Specific Volumes; and others. This part commences with G, the first large articles being Gallium and Gases, the latter being very complete and up to date. A long section is devoted to Heat, which, with the article on Thermodynamics, is very valuable. In the portion on Isomerism we are very glad to notice a slight but still important definition, or rather restriction of the term isomeric. That is, bodies should only be classed as isomeric when their reactions indicate that they are of the same type of structure. This article is of some length, and contains the main points of the hypotheses brought forward by Van L'Hoff and Le Bel and others. We thoroughly agree with the concluding paragraph of the article, and venture to add that probably when we do know a little about the loss or gain in energy in the case of reacting molecules the terms saturated and unsaturated atoms will cease to be employed. The article dovetails into the one on Light, and together they form an important fraction of the book. The greater part of the volume is of course taken up by "organic" and physical chemistry, a considerable number of mineral substances being however described, the section on the metals allied to yttrium being very interesting. The references to the original papers attached to each article render the work even more valuable to those chemists and physicists to whom a few languages is no difficulty. Although a dictionary, it is very thick, and probably an index would facilitate the search after any particular description; but the want is a minor one.

W. R. H.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. Neither can he undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.]

[The Editor urgently requests correspondents to keep their letters as short as possible. The pressure on his space is so great that it is impossible otherwise to ensure the appearance even of communications containing interesting and novel facts.]

The Madeira Earth-electric Cloud again

WHAT a valuable paper, Mr. Editor, you have published this week from Mr. J. B. N. Hennessey, with its diagram of the new set of sun-spots which broke out suddenly near the centre of the sun's disk, between 4h. and 5h. p.m., on July 25, as recorded by the photo-heliograph of the Indian Trigonometrical Survey, under his able charge, at Dehra.

His enthusiasm at having localised the appearance of the phenomenon in time, as well as space, is unexceptionable; and his long experience as an observer gives his opinion commanding weight, when he further holds forth on the rarity of such an occurrence, on such a scale and so centrally situated on the sun's disk—whence its probable vast importance for the physics of the earth and the foundations of a new science. All that is admirably true and suggestive for the future; but meanwhile I desire to claim the first fruits of the case as the very thing I have been expecting ever since I left Madeira at midnight on July 29.

And why should I have been expecting such an announcement, do you ask? Well, do you remember my letter to you from