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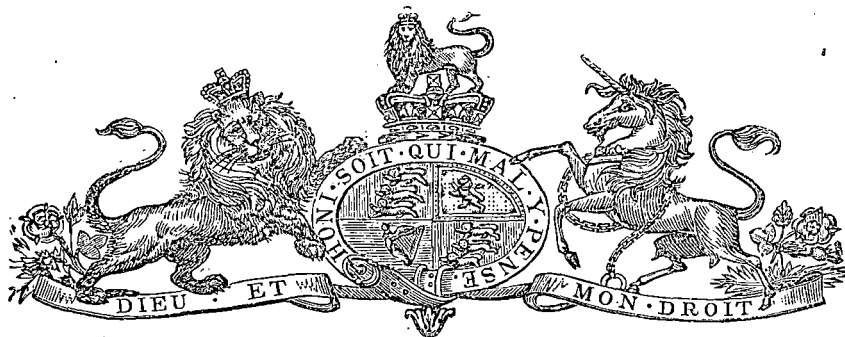
PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

THE TASMANIAN ABORIGINES.

BY JAMES BACKHOUSE WALKER, F.R.G.S.

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BY JAMES BACKHOUSE WALKER, F.R.G.S.

To anthropologists the aborigines of Tasmania presented an exceedingly interesting object of study. Professor Tylor had remarked that in the tribes of Tasmania, only just extinct, we had men whose condition had changed but little since the early Stone Age, and whose life gave us some idea of the earliest prehistoric tribes of the old world, the Drift and Cave men of Europe. It is therefore much to be regretted that so little information remains respecting the Tasmanians in their wild state. The early voyagers, especially the French, did their best with the opportunities they had in casual meeting with the aborigines, and have left us exceedingly interesting and valuable accounts of their observations. But their visits were too short and their acquaintance with the natives too superficial to allow them to gain any intimate knowledge of native customs, or ways of life and thought. They could at most note down a few noticeable external characteristics.

During the early years of the Colony, when the blacks were, on the whole, friendly, no one thought it worth while to take the trouble of studying their ways, or of making any attempt to investigate their tribal customs. If they had been as picturesque as the Red Indian or the Maori, we should probably have known a great deal more about them. But the scientific study of anthropology had not then begun, and the blacks were so low in the scale of civilization that they were deemed unworthy of attention. For no one then recognised that it was the very fact of their being at the bottom of the scale that would have made a thorough knowledge of their ideas of such interest and importance.

Even after the aborigines were imprisoned on Flinders, when such opportunities lay close to the hand of Dr. Milligan and others, it is sad to reflect how little was done. A vocabulary by Milligan, a paper by Davies, and some observations collected by Backhouse and others, are almost the sum total.

G. A. Robinson was probably the only man who thoroughly understood the aborigines. He could have supplied valuable information as to their tribal usages

and ways of thinking, yet, so far as I know, he has not left behind him even the briefest account of the people for whom he ran such risks, though there are still preserved in the Chief Secretary's office very voluminous reports of his expeditions. Robinson told my father many years ago that he had a large quantity of MS. respecting the aborigines, which he intended to publish.

I have in my possession a letter dated from Prahran, Widcombe Hill, Bath, England, March 19, 1864, written by Robinson to the late Mr. Witcomb, in which he says:—"I am now arranging my papers (the vocabulary included) for publication." The papers were never published. Robinson died at Bath, somewhere before 1870, I think; and there is, I suppose, not the least hope of recovering a MS., which would be highly interesting.

The information which has been preserved respecting our native tribes is scattered through scores of books and articles, including casual references in voyages, histories, public documents, and transactions of scientific societies. Many of these works are scarce, some of them almost impossible to obtain. The time and labour required to explore these various sources would be greater than any one but an enthusiast could afford. It is true that West has given an excellent condensed account of the natives in his "History of Tasmania," but it is imperfect, and he cites no authorities. Mr. Bonwick's two books "The Last of the Tasmanians" and "The Daily life of the Tasmanians," deserve more than a passing mention. In these two works the author has collected a great mass of information respecting the history and customs of the aborigines. Every one must recognise the immense service he has done in preserving so much that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost. But excellent and valuable as is the "Daily Life" as a popular and readable account of our native tribes in their original state, it cites no authorities, and does not pretend to strict scientific precision. Brough Smyth's account is more critical, but it is meagre.

When, therefore, in 1890 Mr. H. Ling Roth published

his work, "The Aborigines of Tasmania," he did no inconsiderable service to anthropology. Mr. Roth devoted infinite pains to ransacking in every likely corner, so as to gather together every scrap of first-hand information, no matter how fragmentary, about the aborigines. At the end of his book he gives a list of some 114 works, from which he has made extracts. These extracts he has carefully digested and arranged according to subject, with references to the original authorities in all cases. The result is that the student has before him, in a carefully systematised form, everything that is known about the Tasmanian Tribes, and one's first feeling is one of surprise that so much information could have been got together. The first edition was rapidly exhausted, and soon commanded a greatly enhanced price. For the last nine years Mr. Roth has been engaged in making further inquiries and searches, and has during that time been able to amass a considerable amount of new matter, and to correct a number of defects in the book. He has now issued a new edition, handsomely illustrated, and in it we have at last a complete scientific account of our native tribes derived from the original first-hand sources. The work is faithfully and conscientiously done, and the book is in every respect an admirable one. It throws a new light on the aborigines and adds largely to our knowledge of them, enabling us to fix more accurately than has hitherto been possible, their place in the scale of humanity.

Mr. Roth's method of bringing together into a focus all the various statements with respect to any one subject is of great value, since it enables us to weigh these statements against each other, and, in so doing, to reject not a little which is either plainly erroneous or not supported by adequate evidence. This process of elimination has an interesting result. It tends to strengthen our idea of the extraordinarily low state of development which our Tasmanian natives had reached. We find that in popular accounts they have been credited with a skill and knowledge in various matters, which it is now well-nigh certain they derived from contact with other races, and of which, in their original condition, they were ignorant. Some instances may be given of imported arts which Bonwick, West, and others, even including such a cautious writer as Brough Smyth, have accepted as originally known to the Tasmanians. I may mention the reputed manufacture of ground stone implements, the use of handled implements, of the womera or throwing-stick, and of bone-pointed or jagged spears, the making of different patterns of baskets, the alleged use of the fire-drill, and the drawings attributed to them. In all these matters the evidence collated by Mr. Roth goes to show that any knowledge they may have had of these things was acquired after they had come into contact with Australians or Europeans.

Several of these errors in attributing to the Tasmanians implements which they did not know in their native state have arisen from the carelessness or ignorance of observers, some of whom might have been expected to know better, notably G. A. Robinson and Dr. Milligan.

Ground Stone Implements.—This is a typical instance, and will suffice to cover the whole ground of implements distinctively Australian which have been attributed to Tasmanians. In Dr. Barnard Davis's collection are three ground stone implements labelled "Tasmania. (G. A. Robinson)." They were presented by Robinson to Milligan, and by Milligan to Dr. Davis. These are precisely of the kind used by the Australian blacks, and Dr. Tylor has shown conclusively, in a paper read before the British Association, that they were made either by Australians, or by Tasmanians who had learnt the craft

from them. The bringing over about 1819 of the Sydney black "Mosquito" (who acted such a mischievous part in leading our natives in their attacks on the settlers), and also the introduction of a "tame mob" of Sydney blacks in 1822, sufficiently account, says Dr. Tylor, for this influence from the mainland. The same influence accounts for handled stone implements, bone-pointed and jagged spears, womera, and various other Australian weapons which have been attributed to the Tasmanians. It may be taken as conclusively proved that the Tasmanians originally knew nothing of ground stone implements belonging to the Neolithic Australians. As Tylor remarks:—"The Tasmanians were undoubtedly at a low palaeolithic stage, inferior to that of the Drift and Cave men of Europe."

Baskets.—In his first edition Mr. Roth figures three patterns of baskets as made by the Tasmanians. One of these, presented by Dr. Milligan to the British Museum, is of the ordinary pattern of very simple construction, of which there are several examples in our Museum, and which are undoubtedly Tasmanian. The other two were presented by G. A. Robinson to Dr. Davis. They are of different and more complicated patterns, and of forms very common in Australia. Whereupon Mr. Roth remarks that these baskets are doubtless Australian: that Robinson was for some time protector of the aborigines in Victoria, and was so unobservant that he did not distinguish between baskets of Tasmanian and Victorian workmanship.

Mode of Obtaining Fire.—A more interesting question, and one which must be considered as still open, is—How did the Tasmanians obtain fire? The early voyagers, seeing rough stone implements resembling flint at the camping places, jumped to the conclusion that the natives obtained fire by percussion of flints. This supposed method may be dismissed from consideration, and the question resolves itself into an inquiry as to how they obtained fire by the usual savage method of the friction of two pieces of wood. Mr. Roth, in his first edition, figures a fire-drill (p. xi.) from a specimen labelled as Tasmanian, and presented by Dr. Milligan to Dr. Davis. In the second edition he figures two fire-drills, viz., the one above-mentioned and another presented by G. A. Robinson to Sir John Lubbock. Now, R. H. Davis, who wrote a valuable paper on the Blacks, whom he knew after their captivity on Flinders, states that he was informed that they used a drill for obtaining fire. The drill method, in which a drill is rapidly revolved between the hands, is in use among some Australian tribes, as it is or was among the South African Bushman tribes, but there is no direct evidence that it was known to the Tasmanians. There is evidence, however, derived from the statements of early settlers, that our blacks obtained fire by the friction of a stick rubbed rapidly up and down a groove in another piece of wood, in the fashion commonly practised in Polynesia. Mr. Roth discusses the subject in an appendix, and inclines to the opinion that probably the groove method was practised by the Tasmanians, and that if the drill method was ever employed by them at all, it was learnt from the Australians.

Drawings.—Peron, in the French expedition of 1802, saw at Maria Island pieces of bark with marks like the gashes which the blacks made on their bodies. Dr. Ross says that at the Ouse he saw squares and circles cut on bark, which he, with some probability, attributed to the blacks. Robinson told Bonwick that on the West Coast, in 1831, he saw drawings of men and women and curious hieroglyphics. West speaks of drawings on bark representing a bullock team and cart, made by natives in the North-West. This is apparently copied from

Bunce, who states that one of the V.D.L. Co.'s servants reported having seen such a drawing on a bark hut or shelter of the natives. Calder, who is a most reliable authority for anything which he says he himself saw, in his account of a journey between Lake St. Clair and Macquarie Harbour, in November, 1840, states that on Painter's Plain, near the Surprise River, he found two native huts recently abandoned, on the bark of which were some extraordinary drawings in charcoal of men, kangaroo, dogs, and other figures. Also a battle-piece—a native fight. (J.A.I., p. 21.) At first sight this seems conclusive evidence, but, on turning back to the previous day, we learn that he had then found several articles which indicated that a runaway party of convicts from Macquarie Harbour had passed that way. In any case these drawings were found 40 years after the advent of Europeans. That the aborigines in their wild state had any skill in drawing seems therefore to hang on a very slender thread of evidence.

Canoes.—The native canoes were formed of bundles of bark lashed together with grass or vegetable fibre. Several models of such canoes are preserved in our Museum. It is generally stated in popular accounts (and is quoted by Brough Smyth) that they had also catamarans or rafts, formed of logs 30 feet long, and fastened by cross-pieces tied with bark. The only authority for this statement is Jeffreys, who says that, with the aid of paddles, they made these rafts skim over the water with amazing rapidity. No one else mentions either paddles or rafts.

Fish.—Another point somewhat doubtful is whether the blacks ever ate scaled fish. It is known, of course, that shell-fish formed a considerable portion of their food at some seasons, and that they had no hooks or nets, or other method of catching fish, except spearing them. Lloyd says that they used to spear stingrays for sport. Cook (i. 100) relates that when fish, raw or cooked, was offered to them, they rejected it. No remains of fish have been found about their camps or in their shell heaps. It seems more than probable that they never ate fish, but any information on the point would be valuable.

Clothing.—The chapter on aboriginal clothing is very like the celebrated chapter on snakes in Iceland. The early voyagers describe the aborigines as absolutely unclothed. It is true that some of the women carried a kangaroo-skin slung across their backs, but Cook (i. 101) thought that this was not for clothing, but simply as a means of carrying an infant more conveniently. After intercourse with Europeans they used, at times, to wear skins as a covering. It is certainly strange that in a climate at times so severe as that of Tasmania, with a plentiful supply of skins at hand, they had not learnt to use them as a protection from the weather. That they never learnt to sew skins together for clothing is one of the strongest proofs of their low intelligence, and that they were on a lower plane than the palæolithic Drift and Cave men of Europe, who had bone needles. Yet, though apparently so absolutely wanting in originaive or inventive faculty, they showed in their captivity no want of intelligence or capacity to acquire such comparatively difficult accomplishments as reading and writing.

Implements.—There is probably still something to be learned respecting the chipped stone implements of the aborigines. It has usually been assumed that they were of one general form, but I understand that Mr. J. P. Moir, of the Shot Tower, has a number of concave scrapers, and also of gravers, to which he gives the descriptive name of "duck bills." As these are apparently of forms hitherto unrecognised, it would

be interesting to have them examined. A few weeks since I accompanied Mr. R. M. Johnston and Mr. Morton on their examination of a native quarry, which was discovered by Mr. Harold Bisdee on the Hutton-park estate, near Melton Mowbray. We found about an acre of ground covered with chippings of chert, showing that it must have been for a very long period a place resorted to by the aborigines for procuring their stone implements. An interesting circumstance was that we found a number of rounded nodules of greenstone (mostly broken) which had evidently been used by the natives for splitting off the flakes of chert, that were afterwards, by careful chipping, shaped into stone axes. That the natives had stone implements other than those commonly recognised as such, appears to be highly probable. Mr. Norton Smith has described to me large stones, discovered by him on the North-West Coast, which, in his opinion, bore evidence of human handiwork, but for what purpose they were shaped was doubtful. On our trip to Hutton-park Mr. Bisdee showed us an interesting relic of the aborigines still standing near Tedworth, Constitution Hill. This is a dead tree which still bears the marks of the notches which the black women were accustomed to make to assist them in climbing for opossums. I believe Mr. Morton intends to have this tree removed to the Museum.

Origin.—The question of the origin of the Tasmanians is still an open one. They appeared to belong to the most primeval races of mankind, and to be derived from the same original stock as the Papuans and Melanesians. Indeed, it has been suggested that from this primitive stock (perhaps resembling the Mincopis of the Andaman Islands), both the Melanesians on the one hand and the African negroes on the other, took their origin. It is surmised that they reached Tasmania by way of Australia, and that this palæolithic, woolly-haired negritic stock once peopled the whole Australian Continent, until dispossessed, and probably annihilated, by the present neolithic Australians, characterised by their straight hair and the possession of ground stone implements, the boomerang, throwing-stick, and shield. But on this subject my friend, Mr. R. M. Johnston, may probably have something to say.

Languages.—In concluding these notes, I may mention that an interesting feature in Mr. Ling Roth's book is a full vocabulary of native words, reduced to a scientific method of spelling, in place of the anomalous and absurd fashion of spelling at present in vogue. It is to be hoped that Mr. Roth's method will secure acceptance. I commend it to the notice of the Lands Office.

Tribal Map.—The book also contains a map, in which the native names of places are shown in red, and an attempt has been made to indicate the main tribal divisions. This is, of course, to a certain extent, conjectural, but it is useful.

The main object I have had in view in writing these Notes is to get the members of the section to interest themselves in obtaining from old settlers and others information respecting the points referred to. That such an attempt is not hopeless, even at the present time, I have reason to know. I recently obtained from two old settlers some most interesting particulars respecting the native method of obtaining fire, which go a long way towards solving the question, and it is quite possible that further inquiry in different parts of the Island would elicit more information. I should like to see the section form a collection of all the portraits of the Aborigines which are in existence. Such a collection would be valuable and interesting, more especially in years to come.