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## Australia's Burden

IN the early years of the twentieth century, it was generally accepted—in fact it had almost come to be regarded as axiomatic—that the 'backward' races must inevitably die out. The white man's burden—to civilize the savage—was being discharged in a process of elimination. Now, however, owing in part to a stern check on the more questionable 'advantages' of civilization, in part to what may be termed compendiously the anthropological approach in methods of administration, there are populations, comparatively speaking extensive, of which the numbers are more or less decisively increasing. The peoples of the greater part of Africa are an instance in point, while even the Indians of North America, for long quoted as a tragic example of degeneration and decay, seem to have entered definitely on the upward grade. Evidence from many quarters affords no uncertain indication, not merely that degeneration and extinction are by no means inevitable concomitants of the spread of white civilization to the remoter parts of the world, but also that under regulation of cultural contact and with such a degree of provision of medical attention as civilization normally brings in its train, native communities may retain, or even actually improve, their level in the matter of population, both in respect of absolute numbers and of relative increase.

In these circumstances it is, to say the least, remarkable that pessimism should still govern the outlook on the problem of the Australian aborigines. We are told of "tribes dying on their feet"; while a recent writer closes a review of the history and present condition of the Australian blackfellow in relation to white civilization by saying :

"As a good Australian I deplore that we must confess failure in dealing with our native races. We have studied them as museum specimens are

studied, we have had humanitarian suggestions for their betterment, but we have utterly failed to keep them alive. Some outside advice is needed, or in a few years, a very few years, there will be none of these unique stone age people left—they will have gone the way of the vanished Tasmanians, the way of death." (R. H. Croll, "Wide Horizons", Sydney, 1937, p. 143.)

It cannot be denied, even when every allowance is made for the difference in theological and socio-political outlook of an earlier day, that the record of Australian civilization in relation to the aborigines is bad. It has been estimated that when white settlement first took place in Australia, the native races numbered three hundred thousand. It is quite possible that this figure is too high; but it is generally agreed that a little over a hundred years ago they numbered at least one hundred and fifty thousand. Now, a favourable computation places them at about seventy thousand; and it is probable that the true figure is nearer sixty thousand. One estimate is as low as forty thousand.

Impressive as are these figures, they gain in significance when viewed in relation to the desolation of the abandoned occupation sites on former aboriginal lands, and when interpreted in terms of the complete extermination of those tribes of south-eastern Australia which a little more than a generation ago afforded the anthropologist the evidence, now priceless, of the most primitive form of human society then known among living races—evidence which would be of inestimable value could it now be tested in the field in the light of modern methods of inquiry.

All this, however, belongs to the past; and it little profits to recall it, except in so far as it is a measure of Australia's debt to the aborigines, and to stress the necessity of a change of heart towards

present conditions, while pointing the way to measures of adjustment in the future. Not indeed that it is intended to suggest here that the Australian people is callous in its attitude towards the blackfellow. There is a growing recognition among individuals that the case of the aboriginal demands a 'fair deal'; and on more than one occasion a wave of public indignation has demanded that his rights should be respected and that he should be adequately protected from the effects and encroachments of white civilization.

Some years ago, not long after the Great War, the late Dr. Herbert Basedow, while on a scientific expedition to Central Australia, was aroused to indignation by conditions among the aborigines; and on his return to Adelaide, he stimulated public feeling to a degree which forced the Government to add a large tract of land to the aboriginal reserves in the centre of the continent to provide them with land adequate for the subsistence of tribes still living at the food-gathering and primitive hunting stages of social development.

Further—a fact to which too little recognition has been given in recent discussion—under all the Governments which are responsible for aboriginal administration, legislative measures have been taken for the official protection of the aborigines. The policy of the Queensland Government, as has been pointed out by the Agent-General in London (*The Times*, December 2), aims at the protection and elevation of tribalized and detribalized aborigines alike, the provision of medical attention, and—a most important function—the care of the cross-bred of superior type. Western Australia is taking measures to carry out the recommendations of the Royal Commissioner, to whose report reference was made in these columns at the time of its publication (see *NATURE*, 135, 798; 1935); while the Federal Government, in addition to its existing regulations for aboriginal protection, has recently appointed, in response to public opinion, an anthropologist as Protector of Aborigines.

Nor must the efforts of the missionary organizations be overlooked. They have done, and continue to do, excellent work, which is officially recognized as part of the organization for dealing with the aboriginal. Unfortunately, in consequence of conditions over which the missions have no control, their efforts in the long run add little towards the solution of the problem.

If, then, it may be asked, both Government policy and public opinion are prepared to help the

aborigines, how does it come about that all efforts are of no avail? Is it really the case that the race must inevitably die out, or is there perhaps some justification for the grave indictment of the Government and people of Australia by Prof. F. Wood-Jones and others? Prof. Wood-Jones in his valedictory address to the Victorian Anthropological Society, on leaving Australia for Manchester, it will be noted, returns to a charge which he made some years ago before the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science. It is to be judged from the report of his address which has been published in England that he is of the opinion that, in the interval, nothing of any avail has been done to remedy the evils to which he formerly directed attention.

Setting aside the question whether the extinction of the race is inevitable from inherent causes as too large for discussion here, it may perhaps be said that among the many factors operative in present conditions and affecting the future, two stand out. Of these one is the character, mentality and traditions of the aborigines themselves, the other the general approach of the Australian Governments and still more of the people to the problem.

As regards the aboriginal, it has to be remembered that the race belongs to a very primitive stock, cut off from communication with the rest of the world at a very early stage of racial distribution, that it lives in an arid and difficult country where mode of life for hundreds of years, possibly thousands, has been adjusted with extreme nicety in equilibrium with environmental conditions. Upon this state of equilibrium an advanced civilization has impinged suddenly to throw it out of gear. Only under a prolonged period of tutelage will the aboriginal be able to adapt himself to changed conditions and new methods of gaining a livelihood. That he will be able to do so ultimately, his character and abilities, as now understood, afford assurance; but it must be a form of livelihood which so far as possible should be in harmony with his tradition, aptitudes and mentality. That he is not incapable of such training has been shown by the work which has been done by the missions. It is the duty of the Government by patient inquiry and expert investigation to determine on what lines he can be trained to take his part in the future development of Australia—not as a museum piece, but as an integral part of the community. In the meantime, the provision of land for reserves and of medical attention have

been rendered frustrate by the nomadic tendencies of the tribes, their inclination to drift to centres of white civilization and their mistrust of the white man's 'medicine'. To remove these difficulties in the way of protection should be the task of a sympathetic system of administration.

Secondly, the Australian people cannot be absolved from blame. Outbursts of popular indignation at the treatment meted out to the aborigines are of little avail, even when followed by legislation, if they do not also give rise to a sense of responsibility, constantly vigilant to see that regulations are properly carried out and that abuses are promptly eliminated. When the addition was made to the aboriginal reserves in central Australia to which reference has been made above, it was laid down that no prospecting for minerals would be allowed. Yet within two years, concessions for this purpose were being sought, and it was alleged at the time that the principal agent in the matter was one who had been most active in the agitation for securing the allocation of the reserve. Other encroachments on the reserves have been tolerated. Again, it is generally accepted that it is undesirable that police officers should be asked to undertake protection duties; yet in many instances the protectors are still policemen or officials whose other duties do not allow them to perform their function as protectors with efficiency.

It has been suggested that protection of the aborigines is a duty which should be and could best be undertaken by the Federal Government. Many hold this view. It is a matter that must be judged by the Australians themselves; but it would seem that, provided co-operation and unity

of policy can be secured as between the States, local interest might well serve as a nucleus of that strong and steady public opinion, at present lacking, which is essential to ensure that protective legislation is not only carefully framed, but also effectively put into operation.

It must seem to those who have had the advantage of examining successful systems of administration of native affairs elsewhere, that for the application of modern methods of native control, now accepted as essential for the well-being and future advancement of native races, the urgent need of Australia is a specially trained and efficient service of officers acting as protectors of the aborigines. Reference has been made in this discussion to the administration by the Australian Government of the native affairs of New Guinea and Papua. It is true that conditions there are very different from those of Australia; but they do at least afford this lesson, that for dealing with backward peoples with success it is essential that there should be sympathy and understanding, and that these qualities can be shown best by officers who are trained in the methods of anthropology. They need not be anthropologists in the special sense, but they should be trained to a degree that will ensure that they understand the customs and mentality of the people whom they have to control, and can deal with them with understanding. The cost of such a service in Australia—heavy as it will be—should weigh as nothing by the side of Australia's reputation for fair dealing, and possibly too as against the preservation of a people who one day may find a fitting place in the promotion of Australia's prosperity.

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## Land for the People

### The Hill Lands of Britain :

Development or Decay? By R. G. Stapledon. Pp. 138. (London : Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1937.) 6s. net.

SCHOPENHAUER, in one of his discerning moods, divided authors into three classes : those who write without thinking—the most numerous ; those who think as they write ; and those who have thought before they write—they are rare. There is no doubt of the class to which the author of "The Hill Lands of Britain" belongs ; in fact, he has thought so much, done so much, and has so much to say, that out of very exuberance

of spirit he sometimes forgets that language, like a living thing, has structure as well as function. His few lapses in this direction have prompted a well-known literary critic to pillory him for not being "an elegant, an easy, or a lucid writer". The indictment is far too sweeping : the author's meaning is never in doubt, his message rings clear and true.

Probably few of us realize how much of the green and pleasant land of Britain is sheer waste from the utilitarian point of view. Prof. Stapledon estimates that there are about 18 million acres of land, situated above 700 ft., covering not far short of one third of the land surface of Great Britain,