

**THE ABORIGINES OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**

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The Aborigines of Western Australia by Albert F. Calvert

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P R E F A C E.

ANY attempt to fathom the depth of mystery which surrounds the history of the Australian Aboriginal must necessarily be—in the main—a failure. The subject is surrounded with difficulty. Captain Dampier was the first Englishman known to have made the acquaintance of the Australian natives, whom he calls “the poor winking people of New Holland, the miserablest people on earth,” and so forth. During the intervening two centuries we have not added much to our knowledge regarding them. They have no written language, and are forbidden to speak of the dead: two serious obstacles to research.

I am well aware that the subject is rather out of my line, and for this reason alone I can scarcely expect to do justice to the theme. Nevertheless, during my wanderings through Western Australia, in the capacity of a mining engineer, I came across a good many of the natives; and taking a profound interest in everything connected with the colony I resolved to set down in brief and simple form such facts as I could glean regarding this most curious specimen of the human race. I lay no more claim to originality than is due to one who has arranged his matter in his own way, and added a few thoughts suggested and accruing.

ALBERT F. CALVERT.

Piccadilly Club, W.

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REGARDING the aborigines of Western Australia the materials at our disposal are somewhat scanty.

There exists a theory that all savages are the degraded descendants of civilized ancestors. If this be true it seems to me that the Australian Blackboys' period of enlightenment must have existed very far back in the dim twilight of ancient history.

Theories are, as is well known, apt to outrun facts, so I will not try my reader's patience by venturing to discuss the question of "rise or fall," but content myself with the observation that through unnumbered ages there have been wanderers in the desert, side by side with dwellers in cities; and our black Australian brother seems to have descended from the former class. I am likewise led to remark in passing, that our first parents before the fall did not live in a state of civilization, but of ignorance—an ignorance which was undoubtedly bliss,—for ever to be dispelled by the knowledge of good and evil. It was after the fall when they had to work, and became ashamed of their nude condition, that they

bethought them of the most primitive modes of dress. Thus did civilization and sin enter the world hand in hand, soon after the creation; and the fig leaf was ancestor to the petticoat.

Among the rudest tribes of men, inhabitants of the wild forests and deserts, dependent for their food and clothing on the accidental produce of the earth or spoils of the chase, a form of skull is prevalent, which is termed prognathous, indicating an extension forward of the jaws.* The facial angle peculiar to this formation is low, and is strongly developed among the Alfurian or Australian races. They probably spring from a common source; and the Rev. William Ridley draws attention to the interesting fact that the blacks themselves always have an idea that their ancestors came from the north. Then the current of migration has been ever towards the south and west, and the natives of the north-eastern corner call it "Kai Dowdai" or Little Country. This seems strange when New Guinea is known to them as "Muggi Dowdai" or Great Country. The anomaly is accounted for by their ignorance of the extent of country they inhabit. To those living near Cape York, and passing to and fro across the strait dividing New Holland from New Guinea, the low narrow promontory would seem insignificant compared with the great mountain ranges of the latter. Then again there is a tradition among some tribes that their first parents landed on the North West Corner from Java. All this, however, is at the best but wild conjecture. The real source from which the Aborigines of Australia

originally came is one of those mysteries buried in the impenetrable depths of an unwritten past.

Although marked differences exist between the various Australian languages, and also considerable differences in frame and physiognomy between the various tribes; still the fundamental unity of the population from Swan River to Botany Bay, and from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Bass's Straits is generally admitted.

The natives have no written language and our alphabet is totally inadequate to give expression to some of the sounds which are so volubly emitted. Then of course there are very many different dialects of which the following may be said to be the most important:—

Kamilaroi.—This is spoken from the Castlereagh to the Darling and also on the Namai.

Kailwun.—Spoken on the Barwan, below the junction with the Namai.

Kogai.—This is the dialect in use by all the nations roaming to the Westward of the Balonne all along the Maroonia and the Congoon.

Rukumbul.—Around Calandoon in Queensland; also on the Weir and Macintyre.

Dippil.—About Durundrum on the north side of Moreton Bay and thence towards Wide Bay and the Burnett district in Queensland.

Turrabul.—On the Brisbane River.

Turruwal.—Once spoken by the tribe of Port Jackson, now extinct.