

THE ABORIGINES OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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The Aborigines of New South Wales by John Fraser

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JOHN FRASER

**THE ABORIGINES OF
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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THE ABORIGINES

OF

NEW SOUTH WALES.

BY

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THE ABORIGINES OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

I.—INTRODUCTION.

AN American negro knows that Africa is his ultimate home of origin, but, if one of our Australian blacks at this "World's Exposition" were to claim him as a kinsman, the claim would, in most instances, be promptly rejected as absurd. And yet the whole of Australia and New Guinea and the New Hebrides, and many of the adjacent islands are, at this moment, occupied by black tribes which are branches of an Eastern Ethiopian race, just as truly as the American negroes are sprung from the Western Ethiopians of Africa. These two divisions of the Ethiopian race have existed from the earliest times; for, from the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, it is evident that Homer knew of them in his day; and in the beginning of the fifth century B.C., they were distinct portions of the army that Xerxes led against Greece; for, speaking of them, Herodotus says, "The Ethiopians from the sun-rise (for two kinds served in the expedition) were marshalled with the Indians, and did not at all differ from the others in appearance, but only in their language and their hair. For the Eastern Ethiopians are straight-haired, but those of Libya have hair more curly than that of any other people. These Ethiopians from Asia were accoutred almost the same as the Indians." (*Her.*, VII-70.)

At a much earlier period than Homer's time, these Hamites or Ethiopians were one and undivided; for, on the plains of Babylonia, probably 1500 years before that, they seem to have aspired to universal dominion under the leadership of Nimrod, who was of their blood, and it is quite possible that the Akkadians of primitive Babylonia were Hamites.

If the reader should think it strange that I assert claims of kindred between the Australian indigenes and the American negroes—races who now live in regions so far apart, and in outward circumstances so very different—I would simply ask him to think of the relation which he himself, as a native-born American, bears to many of us in Australia. Three hundred years ago, your individual ancestors and ours lived in the same village, perhaps, in Hampshire; the colonising spirit of our common race there, or the pressure of arbitrary power later on, carried your forefathers to the Columbian land, while ours remained behind, till, in the fulness of time, the thirst for gold or the prospect of a happier life led us hither; and yet I presume that neither Americans nor Australians desire now to disown their common ancestry, separated though we are by the width of a vast ocean. The causes which led to this severance from the old stock in your case and ours were mostly of a peaceful kind; but it must have been violence that broke the Babylonian Hamites into two pieces, and hurled them to the west and to the east—into Africa, and towards Australia. In a great battle, the enemy's line or columns may be firm and dense; yet the charge of a mass of heavy cavalry will cut that line in two, and scatter the fragments far a-field by the mere force of the impact; and, if the disrupting force be strong enough, the broken portions may be kept apart, unable to unite again. Somewhat in this way, I think,

were the black Hamites driven from Babylonia. Settled on these fertile plains, they had increased to a great multitude, when a powerful race from the north—perhaps the Shemites, who afterwards formed the kingdom of Assyria—fell upon them and broke them in two; one portion fled into Africa; the other—the one which concerns my present inquiry—was driven into India; thence, after many and various experiences, into the Eastern Peninsula and Archipelago, and thence into Australia and Melanesia. On this theory, which is in part based on the facts of history, I account for the kinship of the African negro to the Australian indigene.

It will not be necessary, at this point, to say more about the origin of the Australian black man; I now proceed to examine him in his native environment, as he grows up from birth to manhood, and thence from manhood to old age.

If the limits assigned to this pamphlet had permitted, additional sections could have been introduced, treating of the 'karaji' or medicine-man, spirit-world, mythology, the physical features of the natives, their moral and intellectual qualities, their cave-paintings and other specimens of art, their language, as well as the probable origin and migrations of the Australian race. But, as it is, many of my facts and arguments are here produced for the first time; and the same facts are sometimes referred to in two or more sections, for they belong to each.

II.—BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD.

Birth. The children of an Australian household have a pleasant time of it, but the lot of the mother is indeed hard. Married at an early age, she has not only to bear and rear the children, but she does all the heavy work of the family; in camp, it is her duty to put up the rude wind-shelter of sticks and foliage which serves them as a home, to make a fire and keep it burning, and to cook the food; on the march, she carries in a bag, resting on her back and slung from her neck, all their portable property, and seated on this bag is her youngest child, kept securely there and protected from the weather by a cloak of opossum skin, which is also fastened round her neck; in this bag, in addition to the few utensils she requires for domestic labours, she has a yam-stick with which to dig up the numerous native roots which are used as food, a supply of these and of other articles of food required for a meal, a quantity of native string and hooks for catching fish. As her husband walks along, she follows him at a respectful distance, and, if there is any conversation between them, it flies from front to rear and back again. If they sit down to meal, she still keeps behind and gets her share slung to her without ceremony. For the ready kindling of a fire, whenever it is required, she has to carry with her a smouldering piece of firewood; if she allows this to go out, and thus put her lord and master to the labour of getting fire by friction, or if she in any other way gives him displeasure, he will beat her severely, even till her body is covered with bruises and her hair is matted with blood; she sulks, perhaps, for a while thereafter, but soon forgets her beating; for is that not the common lot of all black women? And yet the *kuri* or 'black man' is usually kind and affectionate to his *jin*, 'wife,' and they are, both of them, specially kind and indulgent to their children; if any of the younger ones is injured by an accident, or diseased, or sick, he is carefully tended until well; if he is deformed or otherwise helpless, his parents carry him about even for years, and his brothers must hunt for him, and thus supply him with food.

Cannibalism. And yet these same men, so tender towards the young, have cannibal propensities which they occasionally indulge. If a neighbour's child is fat and plump, some of them think that they are hungry, and, in the absence of the mother, they kill the child and cook it and share it among them. On one occasion, a grown woman, whose bodily condition was that of an ox fit for the shambles, overheard some men expressing a desire for a feast on her flesh; but, discovering herself, she routed them with such a storm of indignant words as a black woman only can utter. The blacks of the present day deny this cannibalism, but it certainly was practised, although not generally; it exists even now in Queensland.

Parturition. In some conditions of her life, the principles laid down in the fifteenth chapter of Leviticus (*vv.* 19, 33) strictly apply to a black woman, whether married or single. She sequesters herself for a time; she must not cook any food for others, for everything she touches is unclean; she lies on the other side of the fire, away from her husband; and a blackfellow, moving about in the bush, will go a long distance round about to avoid her tracks in such a case; if she sees him drawing near her in ignorance, she must call out to warn him, lest contact, even of the faintest kind, should make his hair turn prematurely grey or bring other evils. A 'kuri' once slept in a blanket that had been used by his 'jin.' When he came to know that it was defiled, he thrust his wife through with a spear, and shortly after he himself died from fear of the consequences of this pollution. In some localities, she must paint her head and body down to the waist with red clay, and shun all contact with others.

Parturition is easy, and no assistance is required. If the band is on the move, the woman goes aside into the bush alone or with a female companion, and ere long she rejoins them, either with or without the child; for infanticide is common. If a mother thinks her daily toil so heavy that the child is to be a burden she cannot bear, she buries it in a sand-heap, or puts a pebble in its mouth to choke it, or simply leaves it to perish where it is. Or, if the father thinks that the care of the little one will impair to him the value of his wife's labours, he takes a club, and, notwithstanding the resistance of the mother (for she is not always forsaken by her natural affection), he kills the child. It is curious that, in some places, the maternal uncle is expected to do this deed, and that, in other respects and in other circumstances of a boy's life, this uncle acts as a father to him. Girls especially are not spared. To escape drudgery also, women, who are about to become mothers, kill the child by violence before its birth. The natives do not regard infanticide as a moral offence or a violation of law, but simply as a matter of convenience, regulated by the circumstances of each case; for, in an instance known to me, the parents killed two or three of their earliest offspring and yet spared children that came after, and reared them carefully.

A black woman likes to have children by a white father, for the half-caste son has the qualities of a superior race. Fifty years ago, in one locality which I know, the half-castes had become so numerous that the leaders of the tribe, after deliberation, killed the whole of them. They feared that the young men would be too powerful for the tribe, because of their white blood.

If the band happens to be in camp when a birth is imminent, the father gets out of the way for several days; one or two married women come in to nurse the baby; the sick mother is kept warm, with hot stones, if necessary; she drinks only tepid water, and very little solid food is given to her; in a very short time she is well again. There are very few deaths from child-birth, and there are no idiot children.

Abortion. As in other negro and negroid regions, so here; there is very little abortion from natural causes, and few deformed or peculiar births, although an albino sometimes appears and is allowed to live.

The Child. The newly-born child is not black, but somewhat fair in colour; the blackness appears first on the forehead and then gradually spreads. The soles of the feet and the palms remain white for some time, and these, even in the grown man, are of a light pinkish colour. A half-caste man and a half-caste woman at Gloucester had several children; the first-born grew up to be fairer than black children are, but those that followed were darker and darker; at last, a friend of mine said to the father, "Jimmy, how is this?" "Oh," he replied, "that is always so; the black blood comes out at last." And, so far as my information goes, that explanation seems to be correct. The new-born babe is not washed or swaddled; it is simply rubbed all over with grease and charcoal, and laid near the fire, or committed to the nurse's arms, if there is one present; the placenta is buried. A chrysalis, got from under the bark of a tree, is much valued as food for the child; it tastes like raw eggs. The mother suckles the child, and continues to suckle it for a very long time, perhaps two years or more; the indigestible nature of the black man's food, and the uncertainty of the supply of it, render this necessary for the rearing of the child. From the hardness of her lot in these and other respects, a black woman is barren and old at thirty. There is a restriction of food for the woman herself when she is about to become a mother; she must not eat kangaroo or eel or birds. In Melanesia, the father, too, at that time abstains from certain kinds of food, on the belief that in some occult way they would injure the child.

Naming. This is a very simple affair; if the scream of an eagle was heard at the moment of the birth, or the hoot of an owl, or if a bandicoot or kangaroo was seen to pass by, the name of that animal, with some derivative termination added, is applied to the child; one was even named from fire, because the hut caught fire when the child was born. In some quarters the father and mother, after the birth of their first child, are addressed by the name of their child in honour; a formative—*anni* for the father and *annike* for the mother—is added to the name to make it apply to them. As a parallel to that, we remember that the tribes among whom David Livingstone laboured had a similar custom. Among his Barotse people too children bore the name of gun, horse, waggon, &c. Among the Kalmucks of the Lower Volga, it is customary to carry the new-born babe into the open air, and whatever object first meets the eye—be it sheep, dog, or anything else—that gives its name to the child. Besides the similar usages among us, our blacks also give the child a name from the place where it was born; as Awabakal, 'a man of Awaba,' Awabakalin, 'a woman of Awaba,' England-kal, 'the English.' They have words too to describe the different stages of a man's life; for instance, one tribal dialect says—*taicum*, 'a baby'; *balun*, 'a boy'; *gubbo*, 'a youth'; *murrawan*, 'a lad' in his first initiation; *kumban-gari*, 'a lad,' in another stage of initiation; *kibbara*, 'a lad' fully initiated; *paigal*, 'a man'; *mobeg*, 'an old man.'

Education. Training for bush life begins very early. As soon as the little one is able to toddle about, the father makes for the boy a small spear to practise with at a mark; the girl gets a stick, and is taught to recognise food-roots and to dig them out, to find the larvae of insects under the bark of a tree, and to kill lizards; and the parents take as much delight in this business as we do in teaching our children their