

The background of the cover is a painting of a sunset. A large, bright orange sun is positioned in the upper center, casting a glow over a sky filled with soft, purple and blue clouds. Below the horizon, a body of water reflects the light, and a dark, silhouetted landscape is visible in the foreground. The overall mood is serene and atmospheric.

Global Grey Ebooks

**THE ABORIGINES OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

ALBERT F. CALVERT

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The Aborigines of Western Australia by Albert F. Calvert.

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harsh for our ears. They produced a terrible jarring on my brain, and caused tears to flow even from the eyes of children, who knew little of the cause of the lament.

At length the procession reached the place, and there was a short silence. When the body touched the ground a piercing shriek was given; and, as this died away into a chant, some of the elder women lacerated their scalps with sharp bones, until the blood ran down their faces in streams. The eldest of the bearers stepped forward and proceeded to dig the grave. I offered to dig the grave, but they refused: the digging stick was the proper tool. When with this the earth was loosened, it was thrown out in showers with the hands, forming, in the same line with the grave, two elongated banks.

At length the grave was finished, and they then threw some dry leaves into it and kindled a fire. When this had burnt, they placed the corpse beside the grave and gashed their thighs saying--

"I have brought blood!"

They stamped their feet forcibly on the ground while repeating this, and splashed the blood around them. Then, wiping their wounds with wisps of grass, they took up the dead man. A loud scream ensued, and they gently lowered the body into the grave, resting it on the back.

After that they filled up the grave with soft brushwood, and piled logs on this to a considerable height; after which they constructed a hut over the top of the wood work. Thus ended the funeral number two.

The third, and closing account, I take from the sketch of a funeral at King George's Sound.

The death ceremonies in the neighbourhood of King George's Sound are invariably accompanied by specially loud lamentations. A grave is dug about four feet long and three wide, and perhaps also a yard in depth. The earth that is removed is arranged on one side, in the form of a crescent. At the bottom of the hole is placed some bark, and then some green boughs; and upon this is laid the body, ornamented and enveloped in its cloak, with the knees bent up to the breast, and the arms crossed. Over the body are heaped more green boughs and bark, and the whole is then filled in with earth. Green boughs are finally placed over the earth, and upon these are deposited the spears, knife, and hammer of the deceased, together with the ornaments that belonged to him; his throwing-stick on one side and his kiley and dowak on the other side of the mound. The mourners then carve circles in the bark of the trees that grow near the grave and lastly, making a small fire in front, they gather small boughs, and carefully brush away any portion of earth that may adhere to them. Their faces are coloured black or white in blotches across the forehead, round the temple, and down the cheek bones; and these marks are worn as mourning for a considerable time. They also cut the end of the nose, and scratch it for the purpose of producing tears.

There is thus, it will be seen, considerable diversity in the burial rites of the different tribes. One point, however, which they all appear to attend to, is the careful investigation regarding the *boyl-yas*, or sorcerer, who has caused the death. They are always objects of mysterious dread, having power, they believe, to transport themselves through the air in invisible form. Sometimes another monster is to blame, called the *wan-gul*. It resides in fresh water, and usually attacks females, who pine away and die under its baleful influence.

Old Testament Parallels

It has been said elsewhere that the physical features of Western Australia resemble, in many respects, those of the Holy Land. Both suffer from periodical draughts, and largely depend upon wells for water. Then both have fertile and smiling pastures, side by side with barren sandy wastes. Both have a warm summer, and a pleasant sea-breeze near the coast, and both have largely a limestone foundation. Still more curious to notice is the similarity in some points between the customs of the Aborigines and those of the ancient Jews.

Some of the superstitious rites just referred to remind us of the passage in I. Kings, chap. xviii, verse 28:--"And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them."

Then again, Jeremiah xlvi, 37:--"For every head shall be bald, and every beard clipped: and upon all the hands shall be cuttings," etc. In many parts of Australia the natives cut off portions of their beards at funerals, in addition to the lacerations.

Again, in Deuteronomy xiv, 1, it is written, "Ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead." Evidently the prohibition referred to an ancient Jewish, as well as an idolatrous custom. It is also very singular to remark that when the women among the Aborigines do cut and disfigure their faces for the dead, it is always between the eyes, just as was explicitly forbidden by Moses.

Elsewhere the Prophet Isaiah reprehends the custom of remaining among the graves, which is, to this day a prevalent custom among the natives of Western Australia.

"A people which provoke me to anger," etc., "which remain among the graves and lodge in the monuments."

The native form of taking an oath also closely resembles that described in Genesis, where "the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham, his master."

Australian mothers, again, name their children from some circumstance connected with their birth, or early infancy; just as in Genesis xxx, 11, Leah said, "A troop cometh, and she called his name Gad."

I have already referred to the practice of circumcision, which is common in many parts, from St. Vincent's Gulf to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

I have likewise alluded to the interesting coincidences, but make no attempt to draw inferences therefrom. With but meagre data and inadequate knowledge, the subject is unapproachable. If, however, these primitive people should have received from the common Creator certain laws for the guidance of their lives, does it not furnish food for reflection? It is scarcely necessary that I should disclaim any intention of identifying my aboriginal friends with the Lost Tribes!

Boomerangs

I have already mentioned the kiley, or boomerang, as a native weapon; but this most extraordinary implement deserves special attention. Its possession alone, I contend, redeems the Australian savage from his usually assigned place at the foot of the human ladder. Doubtless other nations--notably the Africans and Indians--have an instrument of somewhat similar form, but the main characteristic is wanting, namely, the *return flight*. Its usual form is a piece of hard wood with the curve of a parabola, about two feet long, two and a half inches broad, one third of an inch thick, and rounded at the extremities. One side is flat, the other rounded, and it is brought to a bluntish edge. It is discharged by the hand at one end, the curved edge being forward and the flat side upwards. After advancing some distance and ascending slowly in the air with a quick rotatory motion, it begins to retrograde, often falling on the ground behind the thrower.

As long as the boomerang retains the forward impetus and catches the air as it will naturally do--on the flat side, it continues to rise. When, however, the movement imparted to it ceases, it begins to fall, and its course of falling will be in the line of least resistance, which is in the direction of the edge that lies obliquely towards the thrower. It will therefore fall back, in the same manner as a kite when the string is suddenly broken is seen to do, when it falls back for a short distance. But the kite, having received no rotation to cause it to continue in the same plane of descent, soon falls, in a series of fan curves, to the ground, as also will the boomerang if it loses its rotatory motion.

Now it is evident that this apparently marvellous property of the boomerang (founded of course on a well-known law of projectiles) must be of great advantage to the natives, who largely use it for throwing among flocks of fowl on rivers, lakes, and marshes. When, after striking or missing its object in the water, instead of being lost it returns back to its owner.

There are several varieties of boomerang, but they all follow this law, being of course to some extent dependent on the skill of the person wielding it. Could any device be more ingenious.

Humor

I have often heard it averred that the natives are utterly wanting in a sense of humour, and therefore are certainly irredeemable savages. Well, I do not know the exact line by which humour and wit are separated, but I think the following anecdote has a savour of both about it.

A well-known explorer, worn out with fatigue, and weak from privations, flung himself by the fire to rest, having almost reached Perth on his return journey. His wretched and woebegone appearance attracted the attention of the native who accompanied him. He had some knowledge of English, and thus addressed his master: "What for do you who have plenty to eat, and much money, walk so far away in the bush?"

The explorer, tired to death, and rather annoyed at this conundrum, made no answer. The black went on: "You are thin, your shanks are long, your belly is small--you had plenty to eat at home, why did you not stop there?" It is hard to make these simple folk understand the love of enterprise and adventure, so the traveller had to say:--

"Oh, you don't understand; you know nothing."

"I know nothing!" he exclaimed, with a laugh, "I know how to keep myself fat, the young women look at me and say, 'he very nice, he fat.' They look at you and say, 'No good, he too thin legs too long, he walk too far in the bush.'"

It cannot be denied that the Englishman had the worst of the argument.

Protection Of Aborigines

Into the discussion--a warm one in the Colony--as to whether the present Aborigines Protection Board, which is independent of the Government, should be directly responsible only to the Crown, and should therefore, be abolished, and the charge of the natives left in the hands of the Executive at Perth, I do not mean to enter. There is much to be said on both sides. Those against the Board's independence say that it is absurd that the latter who are charged with all governmental duties respecting the superior race, the Whites, should not be trusted to deal also on their responsibility with the Blacks. Those in favour of the continuance of the Board's exceptional powers, say that the poor ignorant black subjects of the Queen should be specially protected against the possible greed and racial prejudices of their powerful neighbours, who have, after all, gradually pushed the poor creatures out of their ancient inheritance.

The case for the Colonial Government is very ably put by the Premier, Sir John Forrest, in the following memorandum, addressed to the Administrator, for the Governor's perusal:--

Premier's Office,
Perth,
20th April, 1892.

Memorandum for His Excellency, The Administrator.

1. I have the honour to bring under your consideration the question of the position occupied by the Aborigines Protection Board, constituted under the local Acts 50 Vic. No. 25 and 52 Vic. No. 24.
2. The 70th section of the Constitution Act provides the funds; for the use of this Board, which are expended without the slightest control on the part of the Ministry or Parliament.
3. The insertion of the 70th section in the Constitution Act, and the simultaneous passage of the Act 52 Vic. No. 24, were at the time viewed with much dissatisfaction by the people of the Colony, inasmuch as it was considered as a reflection upon their past treatment of the Aboriginal Race, besides being, in their opinion, totally unnecessary. It being, however, understood that the Imperial Government would insist on these Acts being passed before, granting Responsible Government, when they were introduced by the then Government no opposition was offered.
4. The Board thus constituted and supplied with ample means has had all existence of about 18 months, and has not in the slightest degree been interfered with, nor has it in any case sought advice from Ministers. The appointments to the Board have been made by the Governor without any reference (or consultation with Ministers, and the Board has managed its business as it pleased.
5. This Board, so carefully brought into existence by statute, and supplied with funds by the Constitution Act, is still to a very large extent dependent on the Government for carrying out its duties. While it purports to be a body independent of the Government, it is in reality greatly dependent upon it. Take, for instance, the machinery through which it distributes relief to the sick, the old, and the infirm. This has to be done by the magistrates, the Government medical officers, and the police; nor is any charge made against the £5,000 a year paid by the Government to the Board. As this vote is not all expended, and the unexpended portion is invested by the Board, the Government might fairly charge for all

services rendered by the magistracy, the medical officers, and the police; or, seeing that the Government is opposed to the continuance of the Board, might even refuse to render any assistance, whatever, in which case the Board would be almost powerless to render relief throughout the limits of this very extensive Colony. Again, in regard to the protection of the aborigine, the Board is to a large extent powerless. It cannot execute warrants without the assistance of the Government through the police, and is, therefore, altogether dependent on the Government in this respect.

6. I do not remember, during the 18 months of its existence, any act or representation on the part of the Board with the object of protecting the aborigines, that duty being carried out now, as it always has been, by the Government.

7. The question asked by everyone is, What is the use of this Board, and with what object is £5,000 of the revenue of the Colony handed over to it? Can it be contended that the aborigines are better looked after by this irresponsible body of five gentlemen, who meet once a fortnight at Perth, than they would be by the Government, which is responsible to Parliament, and which has officers all over the Colony to carry out the duties? Or, is it because the Imperial Government believes that these five gentlemen, who meet once a fortnight in Perth, and who have but little machinery to do anything, are more competent and more trustworthy, or more likely to do what is just and right to the aboriginal race than Her Majesty's Government in this Colony? No one, I venture to say, will assent to either of these absurd propositions.

8. And yet it would appear that a feeling of distrust of the people of the Colony to act fairly in dealing with the Aboriginal Race was the only reason why this section found a place in the Constitution Act. There was really a misconception of the whole question. The paucity of the aborigines within the settled districts was not realised. In the South-Western corner of the Colony, with the exception of a few score scattered about here and there, they have entirely disappeared; while within what is called the settled portions of the Colony, the natives work on the sheep stations, and the police visit the stations and protect their interests when necessary. The natives who live on the borders of settlements, who are, as a rule, troublesome as sheep-stealers, the Board is altogether powerless to deal with, and those in the interior have no dealing yet with the white man.

9. The whole duty of this Board since its appointment has merely been to authorise the officers of the Government, viz., magistrates, medical officers, and police, to give relief to the sick, the old, and the infirm; and the Board has to rely upon these officers of the Government to bring these cases under its notice, or it would never hear of them. The number of natives living near Perth, and therefore such as may personally apply to the Board, is not more than a dozen.

10. Supposing the Government decided to leave the Board to carry out its duties without any assistance, what would be the result? It is clear that the Board would be almost powerless to (to anything. The means at its disposal would be really in appointing agents here and there, and the old, infirm, and sick natives would in many places be entirely neglected. It would be impossible for the Government to permit this on the grounds of common humanity, and the Government finds itself in the position of having to look after the interests of the natives through its officers, and at the same time pay for the upkeep of a Board which has not the power or the machinery to do the work.

11. My object in writing this to you is that you may submit this memorandum to the Right Honourable the Secretary of State, and that he may be informed of the position of this question, and the views of this Government upon it.

12. It seems to me that the approval of the Imperial Government to the repeal of the 70th section of the Constitution Act, and the consequent placing of complete trust in the people of this Colony to do what is just and right to all Her Majesty's subjects, whether white or black, would be a graceful act, and would still further strengthen the bonds of loyalty and affection existing between the mother country and this portion of Her Majesty's Dominions.

13. Should the Secretary of State be disposed to take a contrary view of the question, the dissatisfaction now existing must increase, and it will be found that a Bill to repeal this section will be passed every year, or will either have to receive the Royal assent or be vetoed. It was with difficulty I was able to prevent a Bill being introduced at the recent session of Parliament, and if it had been introduced it must have been carried unanimously, as the feeling against this exceptional and unnecessary legislation is unanimous throughout the Colony.

14. Besides the reasons I have given there is also the Constitutional one, which is very important. By this exceptional legislation the Governor is placed in a position to act on his own responsibility, and not upon the advice of Ministers. This may easily place the Governor in direct conflict with his advisers, and result in much inconvenience and injury to all concerned. In no other part of Australia was it considered necessary to place the Governor in a similar position, by which he is involved to act on his own responsibility; and the people of this Colony naturally resent being treated differently to all other of the Australian Colonies, and they very justly, I think, consider it a grave reflection upon their honor and integrity of purpose.

15. I would, therefore, most strongly urge upon Lord Knutsford the advisability of acceding to the unanimous desire of the people of this Colony; and in urging this I am confident, that while the concession will remove a grievance and a just cause of complaint, it will be to the advantage of the Aboriginal Race.

(Sd.) JOHN FORREST,
Premier.

Last year a series of suggestions for the Board's beneficial interference, on behalf of its humble protegés, was made by its Chairman--the Hon. G. AV. Leake,, and these are, I believe, at the present time, being carried out. Mr. Leake's contention was that the Aborigines Protection Board have £5,000 a year and more, to spend in the interests of the natives, and it is submitted that it would be beneficial if the Board could get a statement of the condition of the natives throughout the Colony, and of the relations in which they and the Europeans stand to each other. With that view it would be well if the Board, could get a highly intelligent, educated gentleman, who could visit every station in the Colony, the various goldfields, and the pearl fisheries, from about Geraldton to the DeGrey, and ascertain the number of natives, their mode of employment, their habits, their treatment, their diseases, and this is as much for the sake of statistical information, as of finding fault with either race.

Of course there must be great differences in the treatment, by various Europeans, of the natives in their employ. For instance, I know of some squatters who feed their natives badly and work them hard. Then the natives run away, and warrants are issued by the magistrates for their arrest as absconders. Sheep are stolen, and this may arise from the fact that the native shepherds are few and insufficient, that they are imperfectly supervised, that they are poorly fed, that they suffer from the destruction of native game. In any case these are matters which should be investigated, which has never been yet adequately done. The Tasmanian Aborigines are extinct, those of South Australia are nearly extinct, those of New South

Wales and Queensland are lessening in numbers, and it is surely desirable that some specimens of the surviving race should be preserved.

There are some stations that occur to me as I write--Darlot's, Lacey's, Wittenoom's, Bush's, Forrest's, Sholl's, Grant's--these are, I believe, models as to treatment of natives, and they might be taken as standards for comparison. Reports could be made, not to the general Government, but to the Board, who would impart them to the Government, and so place it in a position to judge to what extent "police protection," as a means of repression of native outrages, is needed. Every station should be visited and reported on, the opinions of settlers and police gathered and examined, a vast body of valuable facts could be amassed, and thus some tangible results would follow from the expenditure of the sum apportioned from the General Revenue and placed at the disposal of the Board. Nor need it be feared by the squatters, or settlers, or gold diggers, that the Board is starting a system of espionage or interference. The motive of the Board is simply to obtain information, more or less accurate and practical, from all available sources, and these investigations should likewise extend to the blacks inhabiting country not as yet occupied by Europeans.

Conclusion

In concluding these remarks on the West Australian Aborigines, I would say a few words to English folk who flatter themselves that they belong to a higher order of created beings than the Western Australian Aborigines, who have been represented as mere baboons possessing an innate and incurable deficiency of intellect, rendering them incapable of instruction or civilization. Let them reflect that a similar opinion was one time held by the cultured Romans concerning the Aborigines of Great Britain. Cicero, in one of his epistles to Atticus, thus refers to our ancestors:--

"Do not," says he, "obtain your slaves from Britain, because they are so stupid and utterly incapable of being taught, that they are not fit to form a part of the household of Atticus."

THE END

I'm Julie, the woman who runs [Global Grey](#) - the website where this ebook was published. These are my own formatted editions, and I hope you enjoyed reading this particular one.

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