DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIANS.

An Essay on the Peculiar Australian Type

A paper by Dr. Benjamin Poulton presented to the Australian Natives' Association. June 1890

"I do not pretend to dogmatize on a subject fraught with difficulty and conjecture; and I think it is, perhaps, premature at the yet early stage of our history as a people for anyone to write authoritatively about the peculiar characteristics of the nation and our Australian as induced by his surroundings.

First, of the colonists—the men and women who during the last half century or more have settled in this new land, discovered its immense resources, first explored its desert wastes, opened up its vast illimitable plains, founded its cities, and planted its outlying settlements.

These our worthy fathers and forefathers emigrated of their own free will, urged forwards, perhaps, by the crowded condition of the old world, fired, many of them, with that spirit of adventure which has ever been a leading characteristic of the British race ; determined, all of them, to better their estates and advance their interests at all hazards.

They were and are an energetic, enterprising people, who, leaving: behind them everything dear and valuable by association, ventured all in the endeavour to found beyond the seas communities, free, loyal, and law-abiding and nobly have they succeeded.

One word more about the earlier colonists. They were composed largely of the more healthy, active minded, and adventurous of their time. Very many of them, notably those who rushed to the goldfields, lived in active stimulating times, times of hardship, toil, and exposure; their weaker members were weeded out or died ; the rest retained and have transmitted to the next generation the impress produced by their earlier struggles.

The character of a people depends not only on the climate and soil and all the various conditions which constitute the general environment, but depends largely for generation after generation on the mental, moral, and physical condition of its ancestors. Changes of type and form may, no doubt, be induced by fresh surroundings, but such changes are necessarily slow, minute, and perhaps difficult to trace; and I don't think sufficient time has elapsed by many decades for the formation of a distinct and permanent Australian type of the Anglo-Saxon race,

My feeble endeavour will therefore be rather to indicate, in touching on some of the more potent Influences affecting Australians, the probable alterations which may be expected, than to seize upon such variations as may be now noticeable in the Australian native, and talk of them as permanent.

In Australia, colonized as it has been and is by adults from all parts of the mother country, people of Scotch, Irish, or English origin or parentage mix and intermarry more freely than they would do in the old countries, and there is thus at once a certain mingling of races, and the production of children combining the various qualities of these three great nations and the foundation of a young race, the common offspring, not of Ireland or Scotland or England, but of Great Britain collectively.

Even where the young Australian is the result of an unmixed marriage he lives as a child, boy, and man, not so much with those only of his father's and mother's race as lie would in their old home country as with children, boys, and men of mingled though closely related types,

There is not here, in short, such a close breeding in-and-in as obtains at any rate in some parts of the mother country, but a greater commingling of all the constituent elements of a not unimportant though small part of the Anglo-Saxon family.

The young Australian thus from the first is in this respect subject to wider and more varied influences than his cousins in the old home village or countryside—is not, let us say, so Scotch as his father, so Irish as his mother— and knows more intimately the direct descendants of (may be) many other young Australians of pure English descent than he would if

bred and reared at his grandfather's right side.

These facts alone have an important influence on the young life in broadening his sympathies towards the old world and his neighbours in the new one, next in rounding off the local angularities peculiar to his parents on both sides, and assimilating him to his fellow Australians.

These and similar causes are tending already to the formation of an Australian as a distinct type. Peculiarities of local dialect, disposition, and custom are forgotten and merged in a common standard, and so oven the old traditions, fragments of folklore, country customs brought by the parents to the new country have but a fleeting and transient hold on their direct descendants in this new land.

May not conditions such as these alone predispose to the formation of a nation somewhat different to that now found in Great Britain? The admixture of colonists from Europe proper, notably Germany, has hitherto been comparatively but small, and has had no particular modifying influence, at any rate in the larger colonies.

To some now to the more obvious external causes which may influence the inhabitants, especially the natives of Australia, one may conveniently say a few words about climate.

Climatic conditions, we know, determine very largely the native fauna and flora of a country, and we are all familiar with modifications in animal and vegetable types induced by climate. The changes in man due to the same causes are perhaps not so familiar, but there they are none the less.

Man, though not so susceptible to climatic influence, or to any but the slowest change of type, is no doubt affected by all through external phenomena which go to make the aggregate we call the climate.

The prevailing characteristics of the Australian climate are in the main dryness, heat, absence of clouded skies, and freedom from extremes of cold. Throughout the greater part of Australia we have more dry days than rainy days, more sunshine than shade, more heat than cold ; our summer is long and hot and dry, our winter often short, seldom cold for many days together, nor wet enough to cause:

prolonged discomfort. Snow is almost unknown, and ice-bound rivers are never seen.

All the conditions for a five and continuous out-of-door life are favourable, consequently our native Australian, we might expect, lives much out of doors, and is often more abroad than at home. His sports are not those of the hearth and fireside, but of the field, the forest, and river. The old English games—cricket, football, tennis—are played even more constantly and generally than in England.

Rowing, especially in Victoria and the eastern colonies, is a national pastime, and the boy who cannot ride a horse is looked upon as a muff.

Everybody takes his recreation in the open air—an immense importance is attached to athletics. Such a people should develop a good growth of bone and muscle, have large chests, strong hearts, be capable of doing and enduring much in the battle of everyday life.

We need hardly fear for the bone, muscle, and blood of the native Australian. He has, as we have seen, every inducement for exercise, and though full and free use of the animal part of him.

But what with reference to the effect of the climate on his mind.

Mens sana in corpore sano is as true here as at our antipodes, and the well-fed, able-bodied individual should, other things being equal, have a fairly good brain and a well-balanced mind.

But the very same climatic surroundings, which encourage a full development of the muscular capabilities, do in some degree tend to prevent an equally extensive and elaborate cultivation of the higher faculties.

Bright sunny days and a clear champagne atmosphere tempt the student from his work and his books throughout the year. Chiefly, however, does the long period of summer heat with its thirsty days and dry hot nights present a difficulty of really formidable character to the sedentary student.

Throughout almost the whole of Australia the extreme heat of summer precludes anything like close continuous study ; at least, so far; the average Australian is not to be found who can with pleasure read and write or even think

profitably with temperature of 90 Fahrenheit in the shade

Such a compulsory break as this may probably be of manifest benefit to the regular student of a University, but its tendency on the community as a whole may not be so beneficial. The very fact that for; several mouths in the year anything like close continuous mental work is approached and carried out with great difficulty must be prejudicial to the fullest exercise of the mental faculties, and prejudicial to that sustained culture of the brain without which the best work is impassible.

Not for a moment would I suggest that the climate of Australia is absolutely and everywhere unfavourable to mental culture and high-class work, for in the southern portions especially, which already contain important educational centres, a very fair proportion of the Australian youth are earnestly and closely engaged in the higher education of the Universities, and I think that the standard of education and the industry of the students compare favourably with those of older-established communities.

In the subtropical and tropical regions, however, though climatic conditions are distinctly unfavourable to mental effort, and in them we can hardly hope ever to find so much attention paid to purely intellectual toil. The bright, fair, warm climate of Australia may be said to stimulate an outdoor and open air life, the popularity of outdoor occupations and amusements, and the development of the physical rather than the mental attributes.

The influence of bright, warm skies and blue weather has, too, a beneficial influence on the temper and tone of a people, predisposing to hopefulness and cheerfulness rather than to melancholy and gloom.

A valuable paper was given at the recent Intercolonial Medical Congress of Australasia by Chisholm Ross, M.D., Medical Officer of the Hospital for the Insane, Gladesville, N.S.W. In it he said :—

"It has just been stated that very few more Australasians than English or Irish were admitted during the decade, and this anomaly may to some extent be explained, when we remember that the majority of these (omitting idiots and imbeciles) sent to this hospital were adults, and that

presumably almost all the English and Irish were so, whereas the general population of the colony consisted of Australasian children in addition to the adults.

Again, it is well known that many 'ne'er-do-weels,' either from vice or mental infirmity, and some who have been insane in the old country, but who have recovered to a certain extent, are sent here to be out of sight of their friends.

But apart from this we still have the startling fact that the number of English and Irish insane in this colony (especially the Irish) are vastly in excess of their proper proportion. That climate may be in their favour seems to me to be demonstrable, seeing that generally speaking everything which conduces to physical conduces also to mental health; and the Australasian climate certainly lends itself to the acquiring and keeping up of health by the amount of open air life which it permits.

It may be worth a passing thought that (statistically) warm countries or climates do not furnish a large percentage of insane from among their inhabitants. At any rate, the number of Chinese and Australasians compared to those further distant from the Equator would seem to point to this.

Can it be that the almost perpetual sunshine over the greater part of Australasia militates against insanity ? With the exception of the Welsh the Australasians seem to have the greatest tendency to states of mental exaltation or excitement. The Americans of the United States (always remembering that the number compared is few) least.

General paralysis of the insane next comes up for consideration, and it is at once seen that from this most fatal form of insanity the Australasians seem to have marked immunity, more so than any other nation, the Americans having the highest proportion.

The remaining forms of insanity are unimportant to our subject, excepting those tabulated as having been caused by drink. It seems undoubted that so far, or as at present constituted, the Australasian nationality is peculiarly free from mental disease.'

The food supply of a community must exercise a great influence on the growth, both physical and mental, of its individuals. Unless it

be sufficient in quantity, and so varied as to include a proper variety, the national health must suffer, ana the full and proper development of the race to seriously interfered with.

There is no question here that the food supply in our settled districts is amply sufficient, nor abundant and varied; an exclusive mutton and-damper diet is more a matter of tradition than actual experience. As a relic, perhaps of the earlier days remains through immense beef and mutton eating capacities of the present generation, who consume all the year round—in the hottest weather as in the middle winter—meat at every meal—meat too, generally robbed of its most nutritious qualities by over cooking.

Sufficient food of a sort is so easily obtained, even by the poorer people, that little is done (I am speaking more especially of the inland country now) to secure much variety. The poorer farmer will furnish his table with beef, mutton, and bread, pickles from London, jam from a factory, and if living in a particularly fertile district will probably add vegetables and milk to his diet; but situated less favourably in a more arid district he seldom plants either garden or orchard, and only occasionally or in good seasons attempts to keep a dairy.

Take him all round the Australian is a very well fed animal; the question is whether he doesn't eat a great deal too much. The immense size of the country we inhabit, the great distances to to traversed between its cities and more populous districts, the wide tracts of unknown country in its interior, the large areas partly explored and known to lie rich for pasture and teeming with minerals, constantly remind us of the vast field open for enterprise, energy, and work, not only in more fully utilizing the settled districts, but also in settling the outlying and more distant regions.

The possibilities of the country are as enormous as its area. Does not the fact of this great, almost uninhabited country, whose fringes we have not yet occupied, standing waiting for settlement, influence the spirit and feeling of the people?

I think it does. The general physical aspect and features of the land are so varied that it is difficult to indicate any special influence they may exert on the character and tone of the inhabitant. Think

of the heavily timbered and well watered parts of mountainous Gippsland or

the Upper Murray, with the fertile, lake studded plains of Colac and Camperdown, the massive tier-like ranges of eastern New South Wales. the boundless plains of Riverina and mid-Queensland, remember the great tracts of monotonous mallee in this colony, the hilly, almost growless forest of Western Australia; and the picturesque mountainous coast country of Northern Queensland, the vast, weird, inhospitable lakes of Central Australia, and we are forced to admit that the aspect of nature in detail is so varied in the different colonies and in different parts of the same colony as to affect the mind in a thousand ways.

Still, whether one walks by a billabong of the Darling, tramp-across the wilds of Gippsland, or traverses the rangy country of so-called Queensland desert, there is something in the air, in the sunshine, in the general character of the foliage and the herbage, the animals and the birds, that tells him he is in Australia. There is, with all its differences of locality, all its diversity of situation, something peculiar and native to the soil.

Perhaps, and in this, I agree with Marcus Clarke and others, there is a sub-tone of quiet melancholy brooding over the Australian bush—a melancholy not untinged by Weird and " grotesque. Taken generally nature presents little very grand, startling, or impressive.

There are no volcanoes, no mighty rushing rivers, no majestic mountain streams-few brisk, bright running streams. But although the outer aspects of nature must and do affect in some sort the spirit and disposition of the inhabitants, I would not lay much stress on the influence they exert upon a civilized and educated people.

The savage may fear the monotonous solitude of a dense forest or dread the bunyip of the dark and quiet marsh ; the pioneer squatter or the struggling cockatoo is, from his traditions and training, leas subject to such external surroundings.

Varied as are the outward aspects of nature in Australia there are other conditions surrounding life here so different from those surrounding our brothers in Great Britain—conditions some of them

peculiar to the country, some of them following the methods of our colonization, and all of them affecting equally residents of tropical Queensland or of South: Australia, Tasmania or Victoria, as to affect in some degree the national character and style.

Whilst we, in common with our fellow-subjects of the British Isles, inherit all the privileges of a settled established government, enjoy the liberties for which our forefathers have fought and worked since Magna. Carta was signed, we live in a country without any history of our own—a country without records, without any monuments, fresh and unaltered by man since the foundation of the world—a laud remarkable for the poverty and insignificance of it aboriginal inhabitants, a people who few and feeble that they have been unable to resist by any banded effort the slow incursion of the colonist, but have simply faded and been driven away from their old camping grounds.

The Australian, then, lives in a fertile rich country, with a fine, if not temperate climate. He has free and easy occupation of the land and has no former occupier to fight. He is descended from a vigorous and active race; inherits all that is good in the constitution and laws of his forefathers. He has escaped much of the dire influences of some of the worst physical and mental diseases of the older civilizations and is free from many of the social and political abuses still rampant in the old world.

Owing to the sparsity of the population for the territory occupied, the race for life is not so keen, poverty is almost unknown, the hours of work are short, holidays are numerous.

Although separated by great distances from the older civilizations of the world he is kept in touch with them by the rapid and frequent ocean steamers and by the constant influx of fresh blood from the old world. In his land without a history he has, unfortunately, nothing to remind him forcibly and by the evidence of his senses of what he owes to the great works achieved in Europe and England during the last thousand years.

The very absence in his environment of old cities, cathedrals, castles, and other monuments, the absence of an aristocracy and fixed grades of

society—ecclesiastical, military, and social—renders it difficult for him rightly to estimate the relative importance his own and other countries, or his proper position in world; but he is still, as I have said, not out of touch by descent and association with his antipodes.

How then, with anything more than approximation to the truth, can one predict the distinctive features of the Australian of the future? I shall not attempt to do so but shall endeavour to sketch shortly such prominent characteristics as have already made themselves patent.

Briefly now to sketch the prevailing characteristics of the Australian of the present day,- so far as I, a prejudiced observer (being a native) am able:—A nation is not built up in a day, nor for centuries may any fixity of national type to attained.

Among them may be mentioned his stature; perhaps rather greater than his father's, a general spareness of form, a good muscular development, a pale or even sallow complexion, and his voice with its slight nasal twang and drawl.

The fact that he attains maturity at an earlier age than the inhabitant of Great Britain may account for his alleged precocity. He is self-confident, self-reliant, takes generally a hopeful view of things, is not notable for his ambition, as he is certainly for his want of reverence both at home and abroad.

He is temperate in his use of spirituous liquors, intemperate in his consumption of meat and tea, hospitable and trustful to strangers, careless of small things even to the fault of thriftlessness, possesses marked powers of self-control, and has a tendency to repress his emotions.

He is not demonstrative: he is critical, cautious rather than enthusiastic, candid, fearlessly truthful. He has not, so far as I know, developed any remarkable virtues or special vices.

In fine, his peculiarities are in the making.

Vale

Dr Benjamin Poulton

Adelaide Surgeon, Nativist

1895-1963

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