NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE EXTINCT TASMANIAN RACE.

Number II.

By

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INTRODUCTION.

The Manuscript from which the following extracts were taken was found among the papers of the Rev. R. Knopwood after his death at Rokeby. It is not in his well-known large script (1). The writer describes the Natives as one who has evidently seen much of them at first hand, and his description of their habits agrees very closely with that of other observers. There is no clue to the writer's identity. The MS. is of four pages small quarto and written on both front and back. I am much indebted to J. W. Beattie, Esq., of Hobart, for permission to make these extracts, as the MS. is part of his unique collection of early Tasmanian material.

The interest of the description is twofold: describing as it does, firstly, the daily routine of the Natives, and, secondly, some of the measures proposed or actually tried, in order to control or conciliate them.

As regards the former, apart from the accounts of some of the early Navigators, we have little knowledge of their personal habits. Labillardière (2) and Ross (3) give perhaps the best eye witness account of their feeding.

Both are very much kinder in their observations than is the author of the present description.

In the second part there is much that is new to me. Governor Davey's Proclamation of 1817 is well known (4). This further series of pictorial proclamations was evidently in use in the early part of the administration of Governor Arthur, *circa* 1827-1831, as it was in the early thirties that the Natives were brought in by G. A. Robinson.

In reading these extracts one must bear in mind the extreme degree of partisanship then existing in Hobart Town and that the writer may be in some part ridiculing the Government. The early part of the MS. is, however, so closely in accord with what others have noted that in my belief we should accept it all as correct.

THE ABORIGINAL NATIVES OF VAN DIEMEN'S LAND.

The aboriginal natives of V.D.L., a race that is now nearly extinct (5), were among the lowest of those who possessed the form and language of man. Hunters without domicile except a few pieces of bark which they put together as a shelter from storm and rain and inhabited, if such a term may be used, for a few days during the continuation of bad weather.

Armed with a waddy (a short piece of heavy wood) and a spear fabricated from the long light and taper tea-tree, both of which they used with much missive dexterity. The females alone wearing a slight covering of Kangaroo skins over the shoulders and conveying in a net constructed of fibrous plants the few necessaries required in their simple and savage life, they passed onwards through the woods in pursuit of game through districts which however extensive were bounded by limits well defined and observed by the various tribes. Roused by the dawn like their nearly kindred denizens of the forest, they spread themselves abroad without losing contact and the means of reunion—destroyed the Kangaroo by the stone, the waddy, or the spear—ascended the most lofty Gum trees in search of the Opossum by means of notches cut in the bark, but more by the tenacity of limb peculiar to the climbing animal—extracted the grub from the decayed trunk—dug for the native yam or stripped the wattle of its gum, and about noon collected together, bearing their spoils, for their daily and only meal.

On that occasion the writer has witnessed a scene which the least fastidious must have beheld with disgust. A large fire was quickly made by throwing together the nearest logs of wood, with the addition of small pieces of bark, which were brought in by some of the hunters in a state of ignition apparently part of a continuous combustion which they might have conveyed from one pile to another for years. Then commences the operation of cookery, if such the rapid and barbarous proceeding might be considered. One of the savages, seizing a kangaroo, tosses it on the fire. In a few seconds the hair was singed off and in a few more the dressing complete. He then hastily smears it with half digested grass which he had extracted from the stomach, and darting his fingers with a force and rapidity that could only be compared to that of the talons of some large and powerful bird of prey into the fleshy protuberances near the tail, he

tore out large pieces which he thrust between his lips, thence quickly disappearing, to be immediately followed by others, without any seeming use of the teeth in the haste with which he satisfies his hunger. From each corner of his mouth descends a stream of blood that continues to ornament his visage until his ravenous craving for food was satiated, and after about half an hour employed by his companions devouring their prey in a similar manner the jaws of nearly all who were present appeared to approximate to a state of quiescence. While the brutal process of satisfying their hunger was in progress the boys watched with eager eyes for the seizure of the animals, which the favourite pieces being previously torn from them and gorged were thrown to the ground, and these they dispatched in a similar manner to their parents. The women were last in the order of consideration, as is universal in savage life, and their provision was rather scanty.

During the scene the Chief stood or perambulated aloof. His person was decorated with various ornaments (rude) composed chiefly of Bone and Berries of attractive and varied colours, and he satisfies his appetite in a manner infinitely more moderate than the inferiors of his tribe. His stature was above the usual standard. His features were remarkable for being comparatively free from the discordant proportions of the others of his tribe; they possessed a relatively intellectual expression, and altogether he presented a rather pleasing example of the aristocracy of nature. A short pause of listlessness and repose succeeded. Amorous attention to the females followed—parties separated and disappeared into the bush. Shrieks and yells of an indescribably wild and acute nature resounded from various quarters, indicating savage mirth and coy estrangement—these by degrees died away, and the close of evening united the tribe around the fire of the day, which in winter was renewed and in summer allowed to die away to its ashes. Such was the course of life of the aboriginal natives of V.D.L., varied only by those feuds with his companions and neighbours which seem inseparable from man in all his phases.

Dismay, self-abasement, and almost horror, were the emotions which it excited when for the first the beholder viewed their dusky figures naked and prostrate on the earth as they sank to a repose only interrupted by an occasional exclamation, more like the indefinite sounds of animal life than the articulate language of human beings, and reflected he must acknowledge them of his race and insomuch of his kindred. . . . . .

Attacks on the part of the natives, originally provoked by the aggression of the stock-keeper and aggravated by the daily encroachment and occupation of their grounds, had become too frequent to be disregarded. Lives had been lost and the deliberations of the Government at length assumed the shape and form of action. Several paintings on panels (a rather perishable material for their intended use) were executed, the size about 18 inches square. These were divided into compartments each of which represented a series of actions, admonitory to the natives, of the course intended by the Government to be pursued in future towards them. In one were represented natives attacking an unfortunate settler's house, reducing it to ashes and placing him in a rather unsettled situation. In a second a terrified wight, his wig departing in one direction and his hat in another, in the rapidity of his flight, was depicted pursued by them, but fortunately rescued by an ambuscade of soldiers, who by a well-directed discharge checked the advance of the enemy. A third; some of the delinquents in chains and the deadly grip of the constable. A fourth, the Court of Law at Hobart Town and their trial in progress, in which were introduced several striking likenesses of the gentlemen of the bar and one particularly admired, that of the Chief Justice Pedder. The subject of the sixth and final was an experiment on that abstruse subject the oscillation of the Pendulum. A native . . . . . etc. One represented a Settler receiving from a native a Kangaroo whom he rewarded by a piece of damper, the name by which bread baked in the ashes was then known. Again was seen the Governor in Regimentals surrounded by a number of aboriginals and patting on the head in the most condescending manner a Pickaninny or infant child. Next appears a minister of the church expounding to his dusky audience the truth of Christianity to the evident astonishment and delight and full perception of his hearers. Lastly, one of them appeared mounted on a horse and blowing a horn with a large leathern bag attached to his saddle, by which was indicated that in the event of their discontinuing hostilities and adopting a peaceful and orderly demeanour, official rank and station should be open to them, and that in time they might even aspire to the dignified and confidential employment of postmen.

These were affixed to trees in distant parts of the island, and the aid of even the infinitesimal calculus must have failed in estimating the chances of their having been observed, or, if observed, understood by those to whom they were directed.

Nothing more was heard of them, and the next step was of a more decisive and efficient nature.

A proclamation was issued by which the natives were incorporated with the other British subjects in the island, endowed with all their rights to the protection of the laws and also made liable to the penalties incurred by their violation. Many differences of opinion, however, existed as to the manner of apprising them of these beneficent intentions. At last it was suggested that the Bellman should be sent through the bush, provided with copies which he might distribute, reciting also their contents to audiences collected in the usual manner. That Functionary, however, was evidently startled at such an unexpected and indeed unreasonable proposition, and evinced much reluctance to undertake an adventure in the prosecution of which some danger might be incurred. He asserted with great appearance of truth that his official duties were limited to the most public street of Hobart Town.

A further expedient considered was to instruct a captured Aborigine in the general principals of Cons. Law and subsequently to dismiss him to his countrymen in order to impart to them the matter adverted to in the Proclamation. . . . . .

The manuscript, which is unsigned and incomplete, ceases at this point.

REFERENCES.

(1) The Rev. R. Knopwood was the official Chaplain to the expedition of Lieutenant-Governor Collins, who founded Hobart in 1804. After many years of service at the settlement he was appointed to Clarence Plains. He died at Rokeby in 1838.

(2) Labillardière. *Voyage in search of La Pérouse*, pp. 306-9.

(3) Ross. *Hobart Town Almanack*, 1830, pp. 100-1.

(4) A copy of this very rare Proclamation may be seen in the Tasmanian Museum.

(5) This sentence seems to show that the MS. was written at least 20-25 years after the events described, as about that time they were within measurable distance of extinction.