

NOTES ON THE LAST LIVING ABORIGINAL OF TASMANIA.

BY JAMES BARNARD, V. P.

It has been generally supposed that the grave has closed over the remains of the last of the aborigines, and that the extinction of the race has been final and complete. This supposition, however, is believed to be erroneous; for there still exists one female descendant of the former "princes of wastes and lords of deserts" in the person of Fanny Cochrane Smith, of Port Cygnet, and the mother of a large family of six sons and five daughters, all of whom are living.

Some doubts have been cast in Parliament and elsewhere upon the claim of Fanny (to keep to her pre-nuptial and first Christian name) to be of the pure blood of her personal ancestors, but after searching the records, and upon her own testimony, and from other evidence, there seems to be little reason to doubt the fact.

It appears, then, that Fanny was born at Flinders Island in 1834 or 1835, and is now about 55 years of age. Sarah was the name of her mother, and Eugene that of her father, and both were undeniably aboriginals. Sarah first lived with a sealer, and became the mother of four half-caste children; and was subsequently married to Eugene (native name, Nicomanie), one of her own people, and had three children, of whom Fanny is the sole survivor and representative of the race.

Lieut. Matthew Curling Friend, R.N., in a paper read before the Tasmanian Society, on March 10th, 1847, "On the decrease of the Aborigines of Tasmania," in alluding to the curious theory propounded by Count Strzelecki, that the aboriginal mother of a half-caste can never produce a black child should she subsequently marry one of her own race, controverts this notion of invariable sterility by quoting two instances which came under his notice while visiting the aboriginal establishment at Flinders Island. I give his own words:—"One was the case of a black woman named Sarah, who had formerly four half-caste children by a sealer with whom she lived, and has had since her abode at Flinders Island, where she married a man of her own race, three black children, two of whom are still alive. The other, a black woman named Harriet, who had formerly by a white man with whom she lived two half-caste children, and has had since her marriage with a black man a fine healthy black infant, who is still living."

Commenting upon this doctrine of Strzelecki, West observes (*Hist. of Tasmania*, vol. 2, p. 75), "A natural law by which the extinction of a race is predicted will not admit of such serious deviations."

Some explanation may properly be expected from me for reviving a question which was supposed to be set at rest when Truganini was consigned to the tomb, and declared to be the last woman of her race. I will therefore mention the incident which has given me something of a personal interest in the matter. It is now nearly 40 years ago that I was accustomed occasionally to accompany my friend the late Dr. Milligan, the Medical Superintendent of the Aborigines, to the settlement at Oyster Cove, where I saw a good deal of the native people, at that time some 30 or 40 in number. Among these I have a distinct recollection of Fanny, who was then apparently about 17 years of age, slender and active, less dusky in colour, but rather more prepossessing in appearance than any of her kind; and certainly at that time I never heard a doubt expressed of her not being a true aboriginal. There was one circumstance in particular which impressed her upon my remembrance, and that was on one occasion we crossed over in a boat from Oyster Cove to Bruni Island, rowed by four of the black men, and Fanny taking the steer-oar, which she handled with marvellous skill and dexterity. My visits to the settlement shortly after ceased, and from that time to the present, until a few weeks ago, when I was greatly surprised to receive a visit from this identical Fanny, who had become transformed into a buxom matron of considerable amplitude.

By the courtesy of the Hon. P. O. Fysh, Chief Secretary and Premier, I have been permitted access to the official records bearing upon the subject of this investigation.

The first documents brought under my attention were two letters under date June 23 and 26, 1882, embodying a report from the Police Magistrate of Franklin, the late E. A. Walpole, emphatically stating that Fanny "is a half-caste, born of an aboriginal woman, by a white man whose name is unknown, at Flinders Island, in or about the year 1835." No authority beyond the expression of his individual opinion is adduced by Mr. Walpole in support of his statement.

The next document was a letter by the late Dr. Milligan, Medical Superintendent of Aborigines, under date July 17, 1854, enclosing William Smith's consent to marry Fanny Cochrane, and describing her as an aboriginal girl belonging to the establishment at Oyster Cove. This affords strong evidence in support of the opposite view of the case, as those who knew Dr. Milligan would remember how precise and accurate he invariably was in any statement of facts.

A point of some importance in the contention would arise from Fanny's second name of Cochrane. According to Bonwick, in his "Last of the Tasmanians," p. 282, this was taken from the sealer who lived with Sarah, whose name was Cottrel Cochrane. Were this so, it would have at once have gone far to settle the question of parentage, and show her to be the half-caste supposed. Bonwick is obviously in error in his statement; for I have lately ascertained from the lips of a married lady living in Hobart, a daughter of the late Mr. Robert Clark, catechist at the aborigines establishment, that Cochrane was the maiden name of her mother, and that it was given by her father to Fanny when a child, and residing in his family.

Again, Bonwick writes (p. 310): "We read of a sawyer, one Smith, and his black friend, Mrs. Fanny Cochrane Smith, receiving £25 a year for their half-caste child." Instead of "black friend" he might have written "black wife"; for the parties were duly married at Hobart by the Rev. Frederick Miller, Congregational minister, in 1854. As respects the cause assigned for the annuity, this writer was also in error, for the sum of £24 (not £25) was bestowed upon Fanny on the occasion of her marriage, and not for the reason stated.

The next document is a letter, dated 8th December, 1842, conveying the official approval of the admission into the Queen's Orphan School of the three aboriginal children named in the margin—Fanny, Martha, Jesse.

Then follows in the records, under same date, an application from Mr. Robert Clark, late catechist of the aborigines on Flinders Island, for permission to receive into his family "an aboriginal child named Fanny, upon his engagement to feed, clothe, and educate her as one of his own children."

Next is an extract from an official document dated 8th March, 1847:—"Eugene and his wife, the father and mother of Fanny and Adam, being asked if they were willing that their children should be sent back to Mr. Clark, said they were not. Fanny being asked if she understood the nature of an oath, answered, 'No,' and the Doctor explained it. Fanny said she did not wish to return to Mr. Clark."

From a long report to the Government by Dr. Milligan, dated November 29th, 1847, I have taken the following extract:—"The fifth girl, Fanny Cochrane, almost a woman, might remain with her half-sister, Mary Ann. Indeed I can scarcely say how otherwise she could be satisfactorily disposed of." There being no difference of opinion as to Sarah being the mother of both, this testimony, given by Dr. Milligan as to a difference of parentage in the case of the father, at once discriminates her from Mary Ann, and in itself affords a strong presumption in favour of the contention.

The superintendent at Oyster Cove, under date 4th November, 1857, reports to the Colonial Secretary the death of Adam, aged 20 years, the youngest of the aborigines; and states that during his illness he was waited upon by his mother, sister, and the latter's husband; these being respectively Sarah, Fanny, and William Smith.

Up to this point my researches have been eminently satisfactory, and have tended to confirm the theory of Fanny being an aboriginal; but another document has been brought under my notice which, unexplained, certainly discountenances that theory. It is the report of certain proceedings taken before Dr. Jeanneret, the superintendent at Flinders Island, on the occasion of certain allegations made against an officer of the establishment, and in which is a deposition made by Fanny, dated March 25th, 1847, commencing with these words,—“I am a half-caste of Van Diemen's Land. My mother is a native. I am about 13 years of age,” etc., with her signature attached at the foot. At first sight this admission would appear to be conclusive and unanswerable; but, upon reflection, I am led to believe that there must be a mistake somewhere. In the first place a child of her age, with imperfectly developed intelligence, would scarcely be likely to volunteer that statement, or do more than give a mechanical assent to the question when asked, without, perhaps, at all understanding its import. Again, possibly the clerk writing the deposition may have understood that Fanny was sister to Mary Ann instead of *half-sister*, and naturally assumed them to be the offspring of the same parents. Besides, it conflicts with all the official correspondence in which she is referred to with Dr. Milligan, the medical superintendent, and Mr. Clark, the catechist, in all of which the term “half-caste” never once appears, and she is invariably designated an aboriginal girl, and distinguished from Mary Ann, her half-sister, and an undisputed half-caste. I may add, also, that Fanny wholly repudiates all knowledge or recollection of the evidence referred to. The paper of Lieut. Friend, which I have quoted, in which he refers to Sarah, the mother of Fanny, in support of his hypothesis, as well as the official statement given of Eugene being her father and Adam being her brother, should remove all doubt as to Fanny being a true aboriginal. While it is not to be denied that differences of opinion exist on the point, I think it must be allowed, from the facts brought forward, that the weight of testimony is in its favour.

The characteristics of the complexion and of the hair have been cited as favouring the opinion that Fanny must be deposed from the pedestal claimed for her as a pure aboriginal

and placed in the ranks of the half-castes. Mr. Walpole states that "her colour is a very dark brown," but I should rather term it a blackish-brown, and showing the true aboriginal tint. On this point it must be remembered that from her infancy she has been encircled within the pale of civilised life, and shielded from the severities of weather and privations to which otherwise she would have been exposed,—all this, together with her surroundings, must naturally have, in some degree, tended to exercise a modifying influence. The same as to her hair, which, if less woolly and like a mop, has no doubt been combed and brushed out to some small extent of its original fluffiness to reconcile it to the model of the hair of the white children with whom she was brought up, and which she would naturally strive to imitate.

The question at issue may appear, at first sight, to be a mere personal matter, and of comparative unimportance, but it is in reality much more than that, and has acquired a scientific aspect deserving of attention. There is reason to believe that the theory of Strzelecki has influenced many to concurrence in his views, and to disregard or overlook the cogency of facts opposed to it. Lieut. Friend, as we have seen, disputes the dictum referred to, and has adduced strong evidence in support of his objection. Thus an interesting problem has been presented for solution.

All controversy, however, must now be regarded as finally set at rest, since the adoption by Parliament, after due inquiry, of two resolutions passed, respectively, in Sessions 1882 and 1884, by the first of which the pension of Fanny Smith was increased from £24 to £50 per annum, and by the second that a grant deed of the 100 acres of land she at that time occupied, and for the 200 acres additional then presented to her, should be issued to Fanny, free of cost; both votes being passed on the ground specified of her being the last survivor of the aboriginal race.

DISCUSSION

MR. STEPHENS asked the writer of the paper not to press the matter too strongly on the Society. While Parliament was free to act at its discretion in entertaining a claim, the Royal Society would not be justified in showing any amiable weakness in the same direction. If, however, he threw out a challenge to ethnologists, he ran the risk of depriving Fanny Smith of what she now enjoyed. He was certain the paper would be well received, and the writer must not attribute any failure to discuss it on its merits to any lack of appreciation.