

XXI.—*On the Dialects and Language of the Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania, and on their Manners and Customs.* By JOSEPH MILLIGAN, F.L.S.

THE day is not far distant, when according to the ordinary course of nature, the last of the surviving remnant of the aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania, now maintained at a Government establishment, and little more than a dozen in number, must be removed by death, and a distinct people cease to exist. The entire extinction of a population, an isolated stirp of the human family, is neither a matter of every day occurrence nor of trivial import.

When Van Diemen's Land was first occupied by Europeans, half a century ago, its aboriginal population spread in tribes sub-tribes and families over the length and breadth of the island, from Cape Portland to Port Davey, and from Oyster Bay to Macquarie Harbour; and their aggregate number at that time has been variously estimated at from 1500 to 5000.

The early navigators make frequent mention of rencontres with numerous groups of "the natives," and of fires, and of "smokes," seen in the bush, which were considered to indicate their presence in considerable force in the neighbourhood. But experience has taught us that such evidence is at the best, fallacious and untrustworthy; we all know that bush-fires may smoulder and rage in turns for months together at certain seasons, and over a great extent of country, without the actual presence of any human being in the vicinity; we also know very well that a mere handful of aborigines appearing, shifting their ground, and re-appearing on the edge of a thick scrub, or in the recesses of forest ground, variously grouped and under different aspects, may easily be, and have often been, mistaken for a formidable number. We, therefore, receive with some allowances the higher estimates formed of the aboriginal population of this island, at or about the time of its discovery.

Assuming that the number of tribes and sub-tribes throughout the territory was then about (20) twenty, and that they each, mustered of men, women, and children 50 to 250 individuals, and allowing to them numbers proportioned to the means of subsistence within the limits of their respective hunting grounds, it does not appear probable that the aggregate aboriginal population did materially if at all exceed 2000. For it is to be borne in mind that all along the western side of the island the face of the country is thickly covered with dank and inhospitable forests, and that other physical conditions most unfavorable to a natural abundance of animal life prevail there, while our traditional knowledge of the tribes known to have existed along the east and centre is sufficiently accurate to enable us to form a close approximation to their actual strength. The Estimates which fixed the native population at 5000 or upwards when the colony was first settled are therefore obviously in error.

The open grassy plains and thinly timbered forest ground along the eastern and central portions of the island were the most eligible for the purposes of the early settlers, and were therefore the portions of the territory first occupied; but these fine tracts of country were precisely those which naturally yielded the means of subsistence in the greatest profusion to the aborigines, and they were accordingly the districts chiefly frequented by the natives at that time. The first colonists were therefore unavoidably brought into contact, and frequently into immediate and familiar intercourse with the tribes belonging to the districts in which they had located themselves; they thus enjoyed peculiar facilities for becoming acquainted with their disposition and habits, and acquiring from the more intelligent of them some knowledge of their history and traditions. Few comparatively of these original settlers—the pioneers of colonization in Van Diemen's Land, remain to communicate the information which

they may thus have obtained. A fortunate few returned home, enriched with the legitimate fruits of industry and good management; others, less successful here in the first instance, migrated early to a neighbouring province, and reaped largely of the golden harvest with which it has been blessed: while many have "passed that bourne whence no traveller returns," and left no record of the simple race whose position, rights, and very existence they had come to usurp and to supersede.

As, under such circumstances, every scrap of authentic information respecting the aborigines of Van Diemen's Land may be regarded as of some value, I avail myself of the opportunity afforded by the publication of the vocabulary of certain aboriginal dialects of Tasmania, and of some remarks necessary thereupon, briefly to make record of such particulars illustrative of their habits, manners, and customs, as have fallen under my notice, or been gathered directly from their statements to myself.

In order that ethnologists and others interested in the vocabulary of aboriginal dialects referred to may be inclined to place perfect confidence in their accuracy, I have to explain that every word before being written down was singly submitted to a Committee (as it were) of several aborigines, and made thoroughly intelligible to them, when the corresponding word in their language, having been agreed upon by them, was entered. This, of course, was a most tedious method to pursue, but it was the only plan which gave a fair chance of precision and truthfulness. On being completed the manuscript was laid aside for two or three years, when it was again submitted, *verbatim* and *seriatim*, to a circle of aborigines for their remarks. A revision which led to the discovery and correction of numerous blunders originating in misapprehension, on the part of the aborigines in the first place, of the true meaning of words which they had been required to translate.

But I found the fault had oftentimes been my own, in having failed to seize the exact and essential vocal expression, which, on being repeated to the aborigines at any time afterwards, would infallibly reproduce the precise idea which it had been stated to imply in the first instance.

This circumstance has strongly impressed upon me the conviction that much of the discordance apparent in the vocabularies of the same language or dialect, published by different travellers, is attributable to similar causes. For instance, a zealous naturalist, knowing nothing whatever of the language the words of which he desired hurriedly to secure, would point to a tree and repeat the word "tree," the reply to which, in all probability, would be not the equivalent for tree, but the specific name by which that particular sort of tree was known there; and so with other things. Abstract ideas are unfamiliar to and not easily comprehended by untutored aboriginal minds, and hence numberless mistakes which, from want of verification and correction, become fixed and permanent errors.

The language of a people, whether it be possessed of a copious or spare vocabulary—whether it consist of a plain collocation of a few simple and arbitrary sounds, or be characterised by elaborate inflexions and a complex arrangement of words of analogical import---ought to be accepted, one would say, as the index of the degree of mental culture and social and intellectual progress attained by those who make use of it, and find it sufficient for the expression of their various thoughts, feelings, and desires. A glance at the vocabulary of aboriginal dialects of Tasmania, and at the condition of the aborigines themselves, will perhaps be thought to lend confirmation to the opinion.

The words or vocal sounds of the unwritten language of rude predatory tribes are liable to more frequent and to more violent and arbitrary changes than are incident to a tongue embodied in the symbolic forms of letters, the various

inflexions, combinations, and analogies of which have been recognised by the eye as well as the ear, and stereotyped, as it were, by the printing press.

The circumstance of the aboriginal inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land being divided into many tribes and sub-tribes, in a state of perpetual antagonism and open hostility to each other, materially added to the number and augmented the energy of the elements and agents of mutation ordinarily operating on the language of an unlettered people: to this was superadded the effect of certain superstitious customs everywhere prevalent, which led from time to time to the absolute rejection and disuse of words previously employed to express objects familiar and indispensable to all---thus imperiously modifying nomenclature and the substantive parts of speech, and tending arbitrarily to diversify the dialects of the several tribes.

The habit of gesticulation and the use of signs to eke out the meaning of monosyllabic expressions, and to give force, precision, and character to vocal sounds, exerted a further modifying effect, producing, as it did, carelessness and laxity of articulation, and in the application and pronunciation of words. The last named irregularity, namely, the distinctly different pronunciation of a word by the same person on different occasions to convey the same idea is very perplexing, until the radical or essential part of the word, apart from prefixes and suffixes, is caught hold of. The affixes, which signify nothing, are *la, lah, le, leh, leah, na, ne, nah, ba, be, beah, bo, ma, me, meah, pa, poo, ra, re, ta, te, ak, ek, ik, &c.* Some early voyagers appear to have mistaken the terminals *la, le, &c.*, as distinctive of sex, when applied to men, women, and the lower animals. The language, when spoken by the natives, was rendered embarrassing by the frequent alliteration of vowels and other startling abbreviations, as well as by the apposition of the incidental increment indifferently before or after the radical

or essential constituent of words. To defects in orthoëpy the Aborigines added short-comings in Syntax, for they observed no settled order or arrangement of words in the construction of their sentences, but conveyed in a supplementary fashion by tone, manner, and gesture those modifications of meaning which we express by mood, tense, number, &c. Nor was this a matter difficult of accomplishment amongst a people living in a state so primitive that animal wants and gratifications, and the exigences of the chase and of war, comprised the sum total of events which characterized their existence either as individuals or as members of the communities to which they belonged. Barbarous tribes, living in isolated positions, antagonistic to and repellent of each other, would each, within its own sphere, yield to various influences, calculated to modify language, and to confirm as well as create dissimilarity. New words introduced into the language of civilized and lettered communities, betray their origin and relationship to pre-existing words in the same or in cognate and kindred tongues; but rude savage people often adopt the most arbitrary and unmeaning sounds through caprice or accident, to represent ideas, in place of words previously in use; a source of mutation, as respects the various dialects spoken amongst the Aborigines of V. D. Land, fertile in proportion to the number of tribes into which they were divided, and the ceaseless feuds which separated them from one another. Hence it was that the numerous tribes of Tasmanian Aborigines were found possessed of distinct dialects, each differing in many particulars from every other.

It has already been implied that the Aborigines had acquired very limited powers of abstraction or generalization. They possessed no words representing abstract ideas; for each variety of gum tree and wattle tree, &c. &c., they had a name, but they had no equivalent for the expression "a tree"; neither could they express abstract qualities, such

as hard, soft, warm, cold, long, short, round, &c. ; for “hard,” they would say “like a stone” ; for “tall,” they would say “long legs” &c. ; and for “round,” they said “like a ball,” “like the moon,” and so on, usually suiting the action to the word, and confirming, by some sign, the meaning to be understood.

The elision and absolute rejection and disuse of words from time to time has been noticed as a source of change in the Aboriginal dialects. It happened thus :—the names of men and women were taken from natural objects and occurrences around, as, for instance, a kangaroo, a gum tree, snow, hail, thunder, the wind, the sea, the Waratah—or Blandifordia or Boronia, when in blossom, &c. ; but it was a settled custom in every tribe, upon the death of any individual, most scrupulously to abstain ever after from mentioning the name of the deceased—a rule, the infraction of which would, they considered, be followed by some dire calamities : they therefore used great circumlocution in referring to a dead person, so as to avoid pronunciation of the name,—if, for instance, William and Mary, man and wife, were both deceased, and Lucy, the deceased sister, of William, had been married to Isaac, also dead, whose son Jemmy still survived, and they wished to speak of Mary, they would say “the wife of the brother of Jemmy’s father’s wife,” and so on. Such a practice must, it is clear, have contributed materially to reduce the number of their substantive appellations, and to create a necessity for new phonetic symbols to represent old ideas, which new vocables would in all probability differ on each occasion, and in every separate tribe ; the only chance of fusion of words between tribes arising out of the capture of females for wives from hostile and alien people,—a custom generally prevalent, and doubtless as beneficial to the race in its effects as it was savage in its mode of execution.

The Tasmanian Aborigines made use of some vocal sounds not met with in the English language; one, for instance, corresponds to the sound of *u*, as pronounced by the French; others are equivalent to *ch* and *gh* in the Scotch and Irish *loch* and *lough*; and there are some curious combinations of nasal and guttural sounds.

The Orthography of the Aboriginal Vocabulary agrees as nearly as possible with the ordinary phonetic expression of the English alphabet, with the following qualifications:—the vowel *a*, when it stands alone, is to be pronounced as in *cat*, *rap*, &c., but *aa* is sounded nearly as *aw* in the word *lawn*, *e* is pronounced as in the English word *the*, and *ee* as in *thee*, *me*, *see*, &c., but *é* is to be sounded like *a* in *potatoe* and in *day*; *i* is to be pronounced as in *sigh*, *fie*, &c.; *o* is to be sounded as in *so*, *go*, *flow*, and *oo* as in *soon*, *moon*, &c.; *u* is never to be sounded as in the English word *flute*, its usual sound being that in the French words *une*, *usage*, *usurier*, *fumer*, &c., but when followed by a double consonant, or by two consonants, it is to be sounded as in the English words *musk*, *bump*, *bump*, &c.; *y* is to be sounded as in the English words *holy*, *glibly*, *yonder*, *yellow*, &c.; *i* before another vowel has a full sound as in the English words *shine*, *riot*; *ei* coming together are to be pronounced as in *Leipsic*, *ou* as in *noun*, *oi* as in *toil*, &c. Consonants have their usual sounds when single; *ch* and *gh* are pronounced as in the German word *hochachten* and in the Irish *Lough*. When a double consonant, or two consonants stand together, the first carries the accent, as in the English words *cunningly*, *peppery*, *cobbler*, *pipkin*.

I propose to treat on another occasion, of the history, habits, and customs of the Aborigines.