



Can Our Aborigines Be Preserved?

Author(s): J. W. Bleakley

Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Sep., 1930), pp. 61-77

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20628875>

Accessed: 03/01/2014 02:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Australian Institute of Policy and Science is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Australian Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

CAN OUR ABORIGINES BE PRESERVED?

(By J. W. BLEAKLEY, Chief Protector of Aborigines.)

Although interesting to many people the subject of this paper can hardly be said to be a keenly debated question, for it seems to be the generally accepted view that the extinction of the Australian Aborigine is inevitable.

To get a right point of view, it must be remembered, as Sir Baldwin Spencer says, that Australia is a very ancient land that for long ages past had been shut off from the rest of the world so that its animals, certainly, and probably man himself, to a large extent, lived in blissful ignorance of life in any other worlds.

As a result, it became the home of creatures crude and quaint, that had elsewhere passed away in the struggle for existence and given place to higher forms. This is a large measure applies equally to the aborigine as to the kangaroo and the platypus. He affords, in fact, as much insight as we are ever likely to gain into the manner of life of men and women of the stone age, who have long since disappeared in other parts of the world and are now known to us, only through their stone implements, rock drawings and carvings, the only imperishable records of their culture that they could leave behind.

Our Aborigine has always, apparently, been by nature a nomad and lived mostly by hunting. He has never reached the agricultural stage, and has no idea of the settled or village life, of cultivating foods or domesticating animals, or converting the skins of the animals killed in the chase into clothing or shelter for himself. He lives from hand to mouth, with no thought of the morrow and apparently for countless generations always has so existed.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

It seems highly probable that, if the white man had not disturbed him by invading his country, he would have continued in the peaceful stone age condition indefinitely.

As from this invasion apparently dates the decay which seems to threaten his very existence it will assist at this stage to outline briefly the chief disposing causes.

Although there have been instances of ruthless killing, the blame can generally be laid on our neglect in the earlier years to understand these people and properly protect them from abuse and exploitation.

The principal agents in their destruction have undoubtedly been:—

- (a) The reduction of their natural food resources by encroachment on their hunting grounds.
- (b) The devastating effects of diseases and vices common to civilisation.
- (c) The complete disintegration of the tribal life.

The white man with his flocks and herds has driven away the game and, by taking the able bodied, the hunters of the tribe, as labour, has deprived the old and young of their means of subsistence.

The consequent privation has forced them to hang around the outskirts of civilisation, dependent upon charity and mostly in a state of semi-starvation, thus being an easy prey to vice and the temptation of drink and drugs.

Dr. Basedow, in his work on the Australian Aboriginal, attributes their decrease in numbers almost entirely to the ravages of disease.

In the clash with our civilisation their whole social fabric has been shattered, the tribal laws, customs and totemic associations, which held the people together and around which their whole soul was bound, have been ruthlessly trodden down and crushed out of existence.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

With their whole interest in life destroyed, their whole outlook hopeless, was there any wonder they just succumbed to the overwhelming influences against them ?

It must not be concluded from the above that every man's hand was against them, for even in the early days there were many whose hearts were full of sympathy for the unfortunate blacks and who raised their voices in protest against the unjust treatment they were receiving. But for many years these were hopelessly in the minority and, though in isolated patches, much humane work was done, it is only of recent years, that the public conscience has really been awakened and definite measures adopted for their protection.

Even in these better days, when hardly a daily paper can be opened without finding some evidence of the growing sympathy for these people, there are many who still adhere to the old idea that they are little better than marsupials and should be treated as animal pests and not as thinking, feeling human beings.

It will, therefore, be plain that the threatened destruction can only be stayed by:—

- (a) Segregating them under protective supervision.
- (b) Securing to them, where still possible, the enjoyment of their own tribal life without interference.
- (c) Where this tribal life has already been destroyed, help the outcasts to a fresh life that will be for them the happiest state possible under the changed circumstances.

Here we may ask the questions commonly put forward: Is it of any use trying to preserve these people? Is not their extinction inevitable? Lord Glenelg, when Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote, "Let us not cast upon Heaven a destruction which is our own and say the aborigines are doomed by Divine Providence when the guilt lies with ourselves?"

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

Our duty to protect, and, if possible, preserve these people being thus plain, we can consider the measures necessary to attain that object.

The aborigines of to-day be divided into four classes:—

- (a) The primitive, whose territory has not yet been invaded.
- (b) Those whose tribal life has been disturbed by our occupation of their lands.
- (c) The civilised or those completely detribalised (if one can coin the term).
- (d) The crossbred.

It can be taken that only with the first class can anything be done to preserve the original tribal life and even that is fraught with grave difficulties. The first step should be to safeguard their country from further encroachment, by reserving the whole or sufficient of it to ensure each tribe having its recognised hunting grounds and sources of natural food supplies. The suggestion frequently made that they should then be left to live their own life would be a right one if the exploiter would equally respect that wish. That protective supervision is necessary is shown by the fact that most of the wild tribes, even under this class, have suffered from the depredations of unscrupulous foreigners.

There are very few of the aborigines of this continent that have not come into contact with the white man or alien, and either seen or felt the effects of his interference.

Although the hunting grounds of the primitive natives of certain parts of the Cape York Peninsula, in Queensland, Arnheim Land, in North Australia, and the Musgrave and Peiterman Ranges in Central Australia, have so far been left to them, there is ample evidence that protection from exploitation is needed.

The numerous murderous attacks on some of the alien fishing crews, notably at Caledon Bay on the East Coast

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

of Arnheim Land, can be taken as evidence that abuses were being attempted or had been practised, which aroused the resentment of the natives.

If, as sometimes happened, this resentment was visited on a quite innocent victim, could anyone blame the ignorant savage when many instances of the white man's methods of dealing out justice or of enforcing his own law are remembered.

Unfortunately, even where only casual contact has occurred, marks have been left that cannot be erased.

Diseases peculiar to civilisation have been introduced and, what is almost as injurious, a taste for white man's food and clothes and even drink and drugs has been created. Once having tasted or learnt of these doubtful joys the native is not likely to long remain a contented savage. So that in any measures for segregation of these primitive tribes they will need to be guarded as much from the weak tendencies within as from the contaminating influences without.

The proposal recently put forward in the South, by certain philanthropic bodies, for the establishment of a Native State, into which all the tribes still intact could be drawn and where they could govern themselves by a tribunal, representative of each tribe, at first under white instructors, but ultimately under a Native Administrator, was advanced with the best of intentions but with little practical knowledge of the character and limitations of the natives. It proposed to thrust upon them a social machine they could not understand. It overlooked the fact that their native laws and customs utterly fail to conceive anything in the nature of combination or federation of tribes for mutual government or protection.

Each tribe is a separate and distinct entity, with its own language, customs and laws environing its peculiar totem and has interest in nothing outside of these associations.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

It is only with the remnants, the few tribes still intact, that anything can be done in the direction of helping them to survive as a race. Whether such measures would at this late hour have any possibility of success, time alone could prove. They might be shielded from the destructive effects of disintegration of their tribal life for a while, but it would seem wise to accept the fact that the tribal life will eventually succumb to the inexorable march of civilisation: and one of the objects of the preservation scheme should be to prepare them gradually for the inevitable change.

As far, then, as these tribes are concerned, the important measures to be adopted at the outset should be to

(a) Secure them from privation by protecting their natural hunting grounds and water. (b) Keep them under benevolent but tactful supervision, to guard against abuses and relieve distress and sickness. (c) Make no unnecessary interference otherwise with tribal life. (d) Prepare them for the inevitable change by educating the young to desire better social conditions and the settled industrious life.

It would be highly important that the officers charged with these duties should be men and women with understanding, who could be trusted to avoid, in an excess of zeal or desire for tangible results, using undue influence in drawing the people away from their tribes or depriving them of their children.

The object should be to win their trust and confidence by ministering to them in sickness or distress and unobtrusively keeping a watchful eye over their welfare.

Experience has shown that, once having established that confidence, the natives readily accept the friendly hand offered and come to regard the "Mission" as a place to which they can come for help and, in time of hunger, leave their children, especially the unwanted orphans, or delicate.

The neighbouring tribes also soon regard it as a neutral ground, on which they can meet and sink, for the time, some of the tribal distrust and jealousy.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

It is through the opportunity afforded for simple instruction of the children that the most effective missionary work can be done amongst the old people.

The section already practically detribalised by the usurpation of their country, however, require different treatment. With their tribal life and all in it that bound them together destroyed, their condition is truly pitiful. Deprived of their usual means of subsistence, for they are forbidden to hunt the forest or fish the waterholes, as this disturbs the stock, they are forced to become dependent upon the charity of those who have robbed them of their heritage.

They hang around the Station homestead, depending on what their young and able bodied, who should be hunters for the tribe, can earn in employment, and what food comes their way on killing day. In many places this is little more than the waste parts of the beast and consequently these indigents, generally the very old and the very young, are usually in a state of semi-starvation. One deplorable result is that they are unable to resist the temptation to get the things they crave for by trading the females in prostitution.

Their old tribal life cannot be rebuilt for them, for they cannot take the gods of their fathers into a strange land.

Their case calls for very sympathetic consideration, for, if left in this exiled and outcast state, they quickly succumb to the ravages of privation and disease; for in their hopeless condition they have no heart to fight.

A great injustice was done to these people when the invader was allowed to take possession of their country without adequately compensating them for the loss. In the Land Acts of some States, provision was made for a reservation in pastoral leases protecting the rights of the natives to hunt their game and use the surface waters, but it is generally a dead letter. It is difficult even for a generous minded stockowner to run his cattle on country

2 1 *

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

occupied by nomadic blacks, without some conflict over the grazing and waters, especially when drought makes the position difficult for either side.

The emaciated and forlorn appearance of these camp indigents shows that they suffer privation.

It is generally admitted that our pastoral industry in Australia has in the past had to depend upon aboriginal labour to an important degree and, in some places, is still entirely dependent upon it for the labour to carry on.

Yet strong objection is still raised to measures for the improvement of their condition or their education, although it would seem reasonable to assume that improvement in intelligence and physical condition should enhance their usefulness as labour.

Again, it is frequently seen that, although this labour is such an essential part of the machinery of industry, less importance is attached to the proper shelter or accommodation for it than for the farming implements, trucks, cars, etc., which, without the black labour, would be quite useless. The excuse advanced is that the natives will not use huts even if provided, but prefer to live in their own camps. Naturally they prefer to be amongst their own folk, but the fact that the miserable kennel-like shelters they usually occupy in these camps are made by themselves, from waste scraps of iron, bags, split benzine tins and such like, would seem to indicate that it is lack of opportunity rather than prejudice.

While recognising the disabilities that white people in the outback labour under as regards facilities for education of their own children, it seems remarkable that more effort is not made, where it is possible, to provide some simple education for the young aboriginal children of these camps, the station labour of the future. Until old enough to be made useful, they run wild, grow precocious in the vices of the camp and are a serious moral danger to the children of

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

the white residents, their daily playmates. Though later on trained to work, very few are ever taught to read, write or count money to enable them to conduct their simple business dealings, consequently they are an easy mark to the dishonest trader or employer. The common excuse that education spoils them seems hardly sufficient; it certainly should not be, at least, for the honest employer who had no reason to fear their knowing too much.

It will already be seen that not the least important of the measures required for the benefit of the people, particularly the so-called detribalised, are efficient medical supervision and moral protection of the females. These present serious difficulties in the big scattered areas, where medical assistance is not readily accessible and where, also, white labour is scarce. There is a line beyond which it is difficult to get white women to go, although some are brave enough to face any reasonable hardship to be with their men. But the absence of medical help or means of getting access to such help or nursing in time of sickness, added to climatic and other hardships, deters most men from asking or bringing their women beyond the line.

The presence of a decent motherly white woman is more protection for the camp women than all the laws made, and also a valuable help in the discovery and treatment of sickness.

For that reason it is most essential that all officers charged with the care and protection of natives should be married men, and be provided with conditions that make it possible to have their lives with them. It is hardly fair to place heavy responsibility upon the shoulders of these outback officers, while placing them in danger of not being able to fearlessly enforce the laws.

It has been frankly said that the black gin has been one of the greatest pioneers of the Never-Never. She has frequently been to the lonely outback man all and more than a white woman could have been. Without her many a man

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

would have found it impossible to carry on, even when his white wife braved the hardships, for the help of the native woman was even then indispensable to make conditions bearable for her. This patient little woman has been the jack of all trades, working, in addition to her domestic duties, at anything from goat-herding to mustering, branding and gardening.

Doubtless many readers have witnessed one of the regular features of bush race meetings, the old black gins race on stock horses.

Obviously, the cure for the troubles of the detribalised would be the removal of all the indigent to reserves where they could receive proper care, protection and treatment.

Unfortunately, any wholesale deportation would seriously boomerang on industries that, even now, find it difficult to carry on; as the removal of their old tribal relatives would cause the younger ones in employment to become discontented and leave.

Deportation should only be resorted to when it becomes necessary, to maintain order, by removing troublesome or dangerous characters, or, as the only possible way to relieve destitution and disease or protect from abuse.

The employer should also be required to do his part in the upliftment by paying a fair wage for the services received, to enable the worker to assist his dependents, and co-operating in the enforcement of the laws for their upliftment and protection.

Unfortunately, in places where they are in reach of towns, the civilised ones come into association with a low class of whites, from whose example and bad advice they learn the worst only of white ideas, and cultivate tastes for extravagance. It is nothing unusual these days for these boys to want to buy tailor-made suits, motor cars, etc.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

Though, in justice, those employed should receive fair pay for their labour, very few are thrifty enough to be trusted to handle their earnings without control. Their lack of education places them at a great disadvantage in business dealings, as they have little idea of values and are easily defrauded by the scheming or dishonest. Travelling hawkers find them easy marks, and tempt them to buy, often beyond their needs or means. Very few can tell what wages is due to them nor if they receive the full amount.

The system by which, except for a small amount of pocket money, according to intelligence, their earnings and spendings are controlled by a responsible officer, is plainly the best in their own interests. The compulsory savings ensure provision for the hungry time and the proper support of their families and dependents.

That something should be done for the relief and protection of the detribalised is essential, not only in justice to themselves, but for the safety of the white community, which frequently draws its domestic labour from the camps.

The risks to health, from the insanitary conditions of these camps and probable loathsome infection, especially in districts where flies are troublesome, must be apparent.

The object of any scheme of protection inaugurated must not only be the physical welfare of these people but also their happiness. No matter how ambitious it may be, it will not succeed if the people are not contented.

Their welfare and happiness would seem to be most successfully assured where a fresh life can be built up, under conditions congenial and natural to them as it is possible to retain under the changed circumstances. Only in this way, where, though it may appear paradoxical, they can live together in something of the atmosphere of their old associations, preserving, as far as possible, their native

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

customs, music, arts and bushcraft, while steadily learning. through the children, some of the better and more suitable of the arts of the new civilisation, do they attain any measure of contentment.

As over-civilised hangers-on of the white communities they can never be completely happy, their outcast position precludes that.

Benevolent white control and direction in their new life will be necessary. They cannot be expected to sink their tribal prejudices and immediately adopt a form of life and government in many ways foreign to their old ideas.

As, however, the beneficial influences of the new life begin to assert themselves, confidences will be established and the idea, to settle within reach of these benefits, soon grow. The children quickly make friends and eagerly avail themselves of the benefits of regular food, medical relief and protection. It is principally through them that the education to the settled and more civilised life can be given, and they make the best missionaries to the old people.

Keeping these facts in mind the aim should be to avoid spoon-feeding or pauperisation, but, instead, to cultivate a spirit of self-dependence by giving them an interest to help in the production of the benefits enjoyed and the building up of the more comfortable and attractive living conditions; and, as development progresses, to encourage them to take as useful a part as possible in the government and management of their own communities.

The crossbreed presents the most difficult problem. Measures to check the increase of them are just as important as action for the care of those now with us.

The halfcaste of fifty per cent. or more aboriginal blood rarely wants to be separated from the blacks, in fact, is far happier amongst his mother's people. He is not wanted

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

by the whites nor does he want to be pushed into a society where he is always an outcast.

He should certainly be rescued from the camps and given the benefit of education and training, but will usually be happier if raised to this civilisation in company with the young aborigines of his own generation.

Even when brought up amongst whites, the halfcaste usually chooses to marry his own colour or even amongst the fullbloods and where they have been equally civilised, these unions are for the benefit of both sides.

If trained in useful trades, these young people can be made an asset to the great rural industries of the outback, which can absorb all such trained labour, whether brown or black.

Those with a preponderance of white blood or showing a capacity for bettering themselves should be given every opportunity and help to do so. They should be treated as special cases, as they embrace perhaps less than ten per cent. of the class.

These children should be removed from aboriginal associations, at the earliest possible age, and given all the advantages in education and vocational training possible to white State children, to minimise, as far as possible, the handicap of their colour and friendless circumstances.

To avoid the dangers of the blood call they should be placed where they will not come into contact with aborigines or halfcastes. In spite of this, however, some will doubtless drift back and to avoid worse evils it may be advisable to allow such to marry back.

Whether the remnants of the tribes still intact can survive under the old nomadic conditions and for how long, will depend largely on the measure of protection afforded to enable them to live their own life undisturbed. That few

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

tribes are left which have not experienced some of the disturbing effects of the presence of the stranger at their gates would appear to justify the steps suggested to prepare them tactfully for the change that seems inevitable.

Once persuaded to adopt the new and more settled life under protection, there seems no reason why the aborigines should not survive and prosper. That they can adapt themselves to the new life, become self-dependent members of a settled community and yet remain the same simple happy people, has been amply demonstrated.

One striking example of this adaptability may be seen in the native settlement at Cowal Creek, near Cape York, Queensland, where the remnants of the old and war-like Seven Rivers and Red Island tribe, of their own volition, have settled down, made a village, and commenced to maintain themselves by gardening, fishing and hunting.

There has never been a white superintendent, the old men of the tribe, with the help of occasional visits from the district Protector at Thursday Island, to encourage and advise, have governed the community and shown praiseworthy ability in copying what they have seen in the neighbouring island and Mission settlements.

Of recent years a Torres Strait native teacher has been attached to the village for the education of the children, but he has no voice in the government.

In a similar way, the old McIvor River tribe years ago settled down and formed a village, 25 miles from the Cape Bedford Mission. The white Superintendent of the latter place has only visited twice a year until recently, but the tribe has worked steadily away at the farms, raising food for themselves and sending their surplus produce to the head station by boat or packhorse. They now work a fishing vessel, but still enjoy their hunting and native amusements.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved ?

The fine races of the Torres Strait Islands, who were once headhunters and whose tribal life was long ago destroyed by the invasion of the pearl fishers and traders, have, under the system of protection and assistance afforded them by the Government, completely rehabilitated themselves. The wisdom of the policy adopted, preserving to them sacredly their island and home waters, has shown itself in the results.

These island communities, numbering 3500 people, are now living a civilised, well ordered life, entirely self supporting and self governing. The only cost to the Government is that of staff for supervision.

They have their own fishing fleet, trading store and boat-building slips. Those not employed fishing cultivate gardens and breed poultry and pigs.

They govern themselves by their native Courts, with Councillors and police chosen from the elders of the village.

They have their own schools, staffed as far as possible with trained native assistant teachers, and are ministered to spiritually by native clergy trained at a native Theological College under the Anglican Mission.

The people still live a picturesque native life, building their house, as in the old days, from native material, but on improved hygienic plan, and laying out their villages on attractive and orderly lines. The native language and many of their customs, dances and songs are still preserved.

The idea has been not to make poor imitation whites of them but better natives.

Equally gratifying results can be shown at many of the institutions for mainlanders, all striving, with of course varying success, to achieve the self-dependence and happiness of their people.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

One glance at the healthy and happy faces in some of these communities, of tribes, once nomadic, now steadily adapting themselves to the settled industrious life, safe from want and molestation, contented to be amongst their "Ain folk" where they can still enjoy something of the old life, with its woodcraft and music, and listen with all the quickening of the blood in them to the wonderful folklore of the old people, will satisfy the most sceptic that these exiles have found in the new life the only possible substitute for what they have lost.

It has been shown that, under protected conditions, they show gratifying increase, and families of four and five children are not uncommon. The Census returns prove that in the States where protection on the above lines is afforded, the people are not dying out, but are increasing in numbers.

Taking the numbers of fullbloods only, the following statistics from the various States for the last three years will be interesting:—

	1927	1928	1929
Queensland	13,523	13,193	14,177
New South Wales	964	1,197	1,234
Victoria	56	53	53
South Australia	2,149	2,615	2,630
Western Australia	22,995	22,597	22,916
Northern Territory	20,258	21,008	20,791

It is not intended to convey the impression that their regeneration will be fraught with no difficulties. The task of uplifting them can only be accomplished by patient and tactful management.

The retarding effects of their old superstitions, their native indolence and improvidence have to be overcome. The attraction of vices, bred in their degraded state, also calls for patience and firmness in the work of eradication.

Their susceptibility to the attacks of devastating epidemics is also a serious difficulty.

Can Our Aborigines be Preserved?

Discipline is at first irksome and, the evils wrought by the clash between the savage and civilised laws have to be firmly wrestled with to foster the stability of home and family life.

But, notwithstanding these failings, they are not, as frequently said, beyond reclamation—no better than marsupials. There are many admirable sides to their characters. They respond to benevolent training and uplifting environment and show pride in their achievements in the simple arts of civilisation.

In Blair's History of Australasia, 1879, is a description by Captain Stokes of H.M.S. "Beagle" of his visit to a native rock picture gallery. In many of the representations of human figures, animals, birds, weapons and domestic implements, he says, much ability was displayed, and evidence of painstaking labour and pride. Doubtless the savage delighted as deeply in the admiration of his rude countrymen as man in civilised regions enjoyed the approbation of his. Wherever we discern; says Captain Stokes, the faintest indication that such a principle is at work there we may hope that development will take place.

I think it will be conceded that, with sympathetic treatment, the people can be preserved and made into good citizens.