ESSAYS ON THE DEPOPULATION OF MELANESIA

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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PREFACE

I GLADLY accepted an invitation to contribute a preface to this collection of essays dealing with a specific case of the inter-relations of white men and "natives," a subject which for fifty years has been of the greatest interest to me, and one which, if till recently it attracted less general interest, has now become of very great and ever increasing imperial importance. The British nation has, almost unintentionally, assumed more or less control over a very great part of the tropical lands, the former occupants of which were folk who, at the time when their home-lands were first entered by people from the West, were in a state of culture, primitive indeed but often very complex, and so entirely different from that under which our own social system has developed as to be, at first sight, almost unintelligible to us. In the past a few of us have partly understood the obligation, but as a nation, we are only now fully realising that, in assuming control of these lands, we have saddled ourselves with the duty of providing as well as may be for the welfare and comfort of the earlier occupants; and still more are we only now realising that, in order adequately to fulfil this duty, it is necessary, as a preliminary, to get understanding not merely of the physical requirements but, at least as much, of the ideas and feelings of these folk of culture quite different from ours.

The essays on the "Depopulation of Melanesia" which follow seem extraordinarily well suited to focus the attention of all thoughtful people on the problems thus presented to us, and, perhaps more clearly than has before been done, on the causes of failure in the past—sadly indicated by the

dying out of the people, as also to suggest more or less possible ways of even now remedying the mistakes of the past, with due regard to the interests of those Europeans who have settled in the islands under consideration, and have there acquired substantial interests.

It is a happy chance that the regions dealt with—the chain formed by the New Hebrides with the Santa Cruz and Solomon Islands—were the latest to be invaded by European settlers, so that there the Melanesian folk retained till a much later date, and in almost absolute purity, their own ideas, customs and culture generally, whereas in Fiji and the more easterly islands the record was blurred at an earlier time by the intrusion, first of European waifs and strays, next by the earliest missionaries, and even by actual settlers.

It is also fortunate that the authors of these essays, writing, it may be observed, independently, are exceptionally well qualified, by personal experience, to deal with the matter from several different points of view. The three missionaries who have contributed have all worked in one or other of the islands under consideration, and, in varying degree, each has tempered missionary zeal of the old fashioned kind and his sympathy with the natives of whom he took charge by a wise application of anthropological lore and methods. Dr Speiser, on the other hand, having gone to the islands to study the folk from the point of view of a scientific anthropologist, has evidently, during his two years of wandering through the various islands, acquired, if indeed he did not already possess, that sympathy with the folk whom he was studying which the old fashioned anthropologist sometimes lacked. Mr Woodford, to whom more than anyone else the present development of the Solomon Islands is due, and the late Sir William Macgregor, whose experience of administration over similar folk was exceptional, have

written as administrators, but without letting their natural zeal for the European development of the islands interfere with their interest in, and sympathy with, the islanders. Lastly the editor, one of the most acute of present-day anthropologists and psychologists, after spending much time in eagerly, and most sympathetically, studying the islanders in their homes, has contributed the final essay, in which, after justly appreciating the facts recorded and the theories put forward by the other writers, he suggests definitely, and almost convincingly that, without at all under-estimating the destructive effect on the islanders' race of physical ill-treatment, sometimes deliberately but much more often quite unintentionally inflicted on it by Europeans, the true, that is to say the most potent, cause of the decay of the race is the loss of interest in life which they have suffered owing to the change which we have brought about in their surrounding conditions—perhaps unavoidably but certainly without fully appreciating the effect of what we were doing.

The history of the European invasion of the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides, so far—and it is of course very far—as this has been responsible for the present condition of the islanders, may usefully be briefly recalled. The islands in question lie outside and south of the one main track, ordained by the winds and currents, which was habitually followed by European ships for some centuries after the first discovery of the Pacific Ocean; and, except for the brief, almost momentary, Spanish attempts at colonising—by Mendana, in 1567, in the Solomon Islands, and by Quiros, in 1606, in the New Hebrides—and for the still more brief visit of Tasman's ships in 1643, through those seas, there is hardly any record of intercourse by Westerners with the islanders till towards the end of the eighteenth century. Doubtless some of the ships that passed

that way, driven by stress of weather to an unknown end on some undiscovered island, may have scattered a few white men among the folk already in occupation of those parts, and that, in such cases, these "lost explorers of the Pacific," as Sir Basil Thomson has called them, may to some slight extent have influenced the arts and ideas of the primitive folk among whom they had been cast away. But any such influence must have been very transitory, for few, if any, traces of it have been noted. It was not till well on in the nineteenth century, when first the sandalwooders (about 1840) and, a very little later, the earliest missionaries established themselves in the New Hebrides, that any considerable European influence was brought to bear on the islanders of those parts. This influence was carried further northward along the group by the many Frenchmen who, after New Caledonia was taken possession of by the French, in 1853, as a convict station, strayed thence into the islands. Still further north, in the Solomon Islands, there does not appear to have been much, if any, European influence till a little later, until indeed the Melanesian Mission, between 1853 and 1856, extended its work to those parts, though not long after this settlers began to scatter themselves over these islands also.

It is not difficult to understand that the few Europeans who thus settled in islands into which white men had hardly before ventured, and where consequently the natives had retained their customs, ideas, and manner of life to a degree rarely seen elsewhere, found the difficulty of establishing even the most necessary intercourse between the intruders and the islanders was very great indeed. It was all the greater in that the white men were divided among themselves; the missionaries and the traders were more or less opposed to each other, and bore themselves towards the natives in very different ways.

The trader, whose main purpose was to get from the islander all that he could, in the way of produce, land and labour, found that he could best get this by treating such of the natives as could supply his wants in these respects with sufficient, if sometimes delusive, kindness and justice, and that he had no occasion to interfere further than this with his Melanesian neighbours' ways, customs and interests. The missionary, on the other hand, saw before him as his one main task the very difficult duty of persuading as many as possible of the islanders suddenly to throw aside practically the whole of the habit of thought and action which, followed through an untold number of generations, had made them, and their forefathers, contented and, in their way, happy, and in place of all this as suddenly to take on the entirely different and infinitely more elaborate habit of thought and deed which has made the people of the western world what they are. It was certainly a stupendous task, especially as the earlier missionaries had no authority to back them, except such as they could assume for themselves; and great credit is due to them for having effected the conversion, even if at times this was of a somewhat artificial nature, of so many of the islanders.

One regrettable effect of this earlier form of missionary effort, well-intended as it was, has been the partial obliteration of the record which might have been obtained of the islanders' habits of thought. Not many years ago, in a tiny and little visited New Hebridean islet, where, however, there has for some time been a mission station, it was my fortune to step over the low dyke of loose stones, exactly such as in those parts is used to keep the too numerous pigs out of the dwelling-houses, and was told that in this case it separated the mission quarters from those of the so-called "heathen"; within the pale, the houses of the Christian occupants were

comparatively clean, and the people themselves were in European clothes, of a dirty but not extravagant nature. The missionary was away at the time; only a few yards outside the pale, I passed, rather unexpectedly, on to the dancing-place of the heathen—as weirdly interesting a scene as one could see. The place was almost surrounded by huge old fig trees, their gnarled branches, some of these dead and leafless, showing out like witches' claws against the sky: in a circle, half buried among the fantastically growing aerial roots of these, were a number of shrine-like erections, each surmounted by a huge figure of a bird, its wooden wings lifted straight up till they touched the overhanging branches of the trees; within each shrine was a great stone, the purpose of which was betrayed by the special wooden club, for the ceremonial killing of pigs, which had been left resting against some of the stones; and here and there in this welter of survivals from an old and little known stage of culture were long table-like stages built of bows, and laden with row upon row of the New Hebridean's greatest treasures—pig's lower jaws, the tusks of which had been caused to grow almost incredibly long, till some of them had formed one or even two complete circles. Here and there, too, there were life-sized figures of men made, after the characteristic style of New Hebridean art, of some soft dark wood, patterned with stripes of red, yellow, and white. It was on one of these human figures that there was the most surprising of all the things seen on that day; for from where the waist should have been, if the lower part of the figure had been more than very roughly worked out—there hung what was quite clearly meant to represent a crucifix, such as the image-maker had doubtless seen carried by the Fathers from the Roman Catholic Mission on an adjoining island.

The things seen on this island suggested perhaps more vividly than anything else could have done the almost immeasurable difference between Melanesian and European cultures, and the sharpness of the line which still divides them where they come in contact.

Almost simultaneously with the earliest settlement of Europeans within these Melanesian islands, Europeans of another kind appeared there from time to time, to disturb the peaceful lives not only of the islanders but also of the missionaries and settlers. The "labour traffic" had been begun about 1847, when Pacific Islanders were successfully imported into Australia for work on the sheep-runs. At first the labourers thus taken were chiefly Polynesians from the Gilbert Islands and other islands still more to the east; but the increasing demand from Australia, and subsequently from Fiji, for labourers of this sort caused the recruiters to turn their attention to the Melanesian islands. There is no occasion here to dwell on the brutality and disregard of the interests and rights of the labourers with which this trade, at times certainly, was carried on; but, as a rule, when the men were once at work on plantations they were not badly treated, and in a sense they even benefited, by introduction to habits of steady labour. Naturally, however, the settlers in the Melanesian islands resented the depletion of their labour supply; and, still more frequently, the missionaries resented the frequent removal of members of their flocks.

But the worst result of this labour traffic was in the effect that it often, though not always, had on the characters of the islanders who were the subjects of it. Far away from their own islands, and surrounded by men who had no interest in them except as labour-machines, they too often picked up the white man's vices without any of his good qualities; and, even if they were fortunate enough to be

sent back to their homes at no very long time after they were due for return, they were apt to carry with them either bitter resentment against the white man or keen longing to get back to the more exciting experiences they had had in the white man's country. Nor, greatly changed as they generally had been by these experiences, were they always very welcome at home. Even their own folk, to whom they must have seemed as men returned from the dead, hardly knew or wanted them; and the missionaries, who, by the seventies, about which time the labour trade had entered its worst phase, had built up for themselves a sort of theocratic government, more or less recognised or at least respected and feared by the islanders who had stayed at home, but not at all by the returned wanderers, found themselves thwarted at every turn by certain of the last named. It is but fair to add that some of these returned islanders—those who had been fortunately treated during their service abroad—became useful members of society in the islands to which they returned, though others became in the highest degree dangerous to the peace and welfare of that society, especially by stirring up hostility to the Europeans.

The state of unrest in these Melanesian islands eventually became so serious that, in 1873, the first step was taken to supplement and back the necessarily weak authority which the few and scattered resident missionaries had contrived to assume. The first "Pacific Islanders' Protection Act" was passed in the Imperial Parliament in that year; and two years later—Fiji having at that time acquired the status of a Crown Colony—the opportunity was taken to strengthen the Act by the appointment of a High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, with instructions and authority, within such of the islands as were not subject to any Foreign Power,

to protect the islanders against aggression by British subjects, and, incidentally, to protect Europeans from attack by the islanders, but without power to intervene in disputes in which natives alone were concerned.

These first steps were in the right direction; but to give effect to them it was obviously necessary to provide the High Commissioner, who was resident in Fiji and could not even visit the islands at frequent intervals, with assistants to reside and carry out the scheme in the islands. At first this assistance was limited to a single Deputy to reside in each of the main groups and the occasional assistance of a Naval Captain, who was deputed to visit the islands from time to time—during such season of the year as was not subject to hurricanes! Considerable additions, it need hardly be said, have since been made to this totally inadequate staff, but even now the number of Government representatives resident in the islands throughout the year is quite inadequate to enforce British law and justice throughout this chain of widely scattered islands.

A further remedial measure, for the special purpose of checking the misdeeds of certain of the labour recruiters whose activities had by that time earned the ill-name of "black-birding," was taken. Immigration Agents were appointed by the Governments of Australia and Fiji, to control the business, and each labour vessel proceeding to the islands was accompanied by a special "government agent," whose business it was to see that no islanders were recruited against their will and that all who were taken received fair treatment during transport. By these means great improvement was certainly effected in the way in which the trade was carried on; that the old evils were not completely cured was due chiefly to two facts, partly that it was impossible to stop recruiting from islands so remote as to be practically

beyond the ken of the few Europeans resident in the groups, and partly that the recruits from the islands, however humanely they might be dealt with, could not but suffer in character by removal from their island-homes, where, indeed, their innate ideas and customs were but little understood by the few Europeans with whom they there came in contact, to entirely new surroundings where it scarcely occurred to any one to try to understand and make allowance for the mental attitude of these labourers of strangely primitive culture.

Now that the labour trade, even under its improved conditions, has been, though only quite recently, entirely prohibited, it is useless to deplore but useful to bear in mind the evil consequences which it has had on the Melanesian character.

Meanwhile, settlement by Europeans on the islands proceeded, with varying success, one result of which was to bring very difficult "native land questions" into prominence, and with the general result that some form of actual annexation by a Power able to enforce its regulations became essential, in the interest both of the islanders and of the European settlers.

In the case of the Solomon Islands, annexation by Great Britain, though it was effected somewhat late in the day, was comparatively easy; for, with the exception of the large northernmost island of Bougainville, with one or two small islands close to it, the whole of the group had for some time been undisputedly under British influence. It was unfortunately otherwise in the case of the New Hebrides, where, French and British interests being quite inextricably intermingled, the best that could be done was to patch up an Anglo-French "Condominium," which novel and remarkable political experiment, even though it might be effective as

regards purely European interests, is entirely inadequate, owing to the radical difference between British and French views in such matters, for the control and help of the islanders.

To sum up: it can hardly be doubted, and least by those who read these essays, that the rapid disappearance of the Melanesian folk of these islands is a direct, however unintended, consequence of the settlement among them of Europeans; and it seems almost as certain that while this calamity is due, certainly in great measure to the action, often necessary and, under the circumstances, unavoidable but sometimes also callous and even brutal, of those who have gone there for the immediate purpose of developing and exploiting the land, it is also due in some measure to the well-intended, but sometimes mistaken and ill-calculated, and sometimes inadequate, efforts of missionaries and Government representatives to save the islanders from the worst effects brought on them by the in-rush of Europeans.

The facts put forward by the essayists suffice at least to indicate the nature of the causes which have brought about such deplorable effects. Briefly put, and always allowing for the too frequent cases which there have been of actual inhuman treatment of the islanders, the main cause of whatever failure there has been in the efforts of those whose desire and duty has been to soften the impact between the two races that have now met in the islands has been want of understanding by us of the islanders and failure to grasp the immense difference which lay between their culture and ours. Settlers, missionaries, and Government representatives have all, in varying degree, been hampered by this form of error.

Comparatively minor instances of the ill-effects of this fundamental mistake are put forward by the various writers

in this book; and Dr Rivers, in the final essay, has focussed attention on the one which is perhaps the one chief ill-effect of all—we have, quite unintentionally no doubt, destroyed the islanders' interest in life. The earlier missionaries, always, it must fully be admitted, suppressed, probably they seldom succeeded in destroying, the islander's instincts and ideas corresponding to our religion, and imposed upon him instead our own utterly different ideas of that sort; they first also persuaded the islander of the righteousness of clothing his body, with the result, of course afterwards fostered by the traders, that he developed a taste for unbecoming and utterly insanitary European clothing. Meanwhile, the settlers deprived the islanders of much of their best land and its produce, thereby depriving them of another of their occupations and interests. And, at a somewhat later time, Government stepped in and found it necessary to suppress such of the islanders' customs as were entirely inconsistent with the safety of the mixed human society which had come together in the islands—with the result, often quite unintended, that the islander got the idea that he could practise only surreptitiously such of his habits and customs as were not after the European fashion; moreover, the deprivation of the really obnoxious customs from which he was necessarily prohibited, such as head-hunting, was a really serious loss to him, for head-hunting had been not only an interesting sport but his one means of proving his manhood and gaining his wife. And even the kinds of illness and disease to which he and his forefathers had been subject were revolutionised by the introduction of European diseases. It was indeed a changed world in which the islander found himself—and one in which he had little desire to stay.

It is difficult to see clearly what remedies should now be applied to this obviously evil state of affairs. Certain remedies

are tentatively and somewhat hesitatingly indicated in these essays, and with most of these suggestions I agree. But, even after having thought over the matter for years, it is only with diffidence that I offer some suggestion on this difficult problem.

There can be no possible doubt that the most essential step, even at this late date, should be the systematic study, by all Europeans resident in those islands and charged with, or interested in, the welfare of the natives, of the habits, customs, and ideas natural to the Melanesian; and here it should be remembered that, owing to the historical circumstances above recalled, the Solomon Islanders, and to a less extent this is true also of the New Hebrideans, have, behind the veneer of doubtfully genuine European culture which has been imposed on many of them, retained much of their own culture and social organisation, so that even now it is easier to get at their own original ideas and feelings than it is to ascertain the unadulterated feelings and ideas of the Fijians or those of the natives of other Pacific Islands which for a longer time have been centres of European life.

Secondly, the best way to treat the natives having been ascertained by the above-mentioned means, there should be greater co-operation—indeed it should be as complete as possible—between the Government representatives and the missionaries in systematically carrying out the treatment thus determined on. The number of missionaries scattered through the islands and in intimate relations with the island folk is not great; and the number of Government representatives correspondingly situated is still less. Economy, no doubt, prohibits any great increase in these numbers. Co-operation between Church and State, if it were possible in any way to bring this about—say to the extent that the resident missionaries' services might be enlisted as Justices

of the Peace—might help considerably toward better care for the physical welfare and mental interests of the Islanders.

In this, as in so many other matters tending toward better administration in the islands, the difficulty would probably be less in the Solomon Islands than in the New Hebrides, owing to the existence in the last-named group of the Condominium and the greatly different views of the French and British Governments as to the treatment of natives.

EVERARD IM THURN.

23 *April*, 1922.

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