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Alfred William Howitt

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## CHAPTER I

ON THE ORIGIN OF THE ABORIGINES OF  
TASMANIA AND AUSTRALIA

Literature relating to the subject—No evidence that the Tasmanians reached the Island by water—They must have gone when there was land communication with the Australian coast—Literature relating to the Australian coast—The Australian ancestors must also have arrived by land communication—Probably they came from lands lying to the north or north-west of the continent—Physical geography of the northern coasts—Probable route of migration by New Guinea—Evidence of antiquity of man in Australia—Legends of volcanic era in Australia—Evidence of period of subsidence in Victoria—Coastal soundings—The Tasmanians the autochthonous inhabitants of Australia—Mr. Mathew's Malayan hypothesis—Australians belong to Caucasian stock—The connection between the Australians and Dravidians considered—Tasmanians placed among the Oceanic Negritos—The evidence points to vast antiquity of both races in their latest surroundings.

THE question of the origin of the Australian and Tasmanian aborigines has engaged the attention of many writers, who have attempted its solution by inferences drawn from language, from custom, from the physical character of those savages, and, while direct evidence is not existent, from what some writers apparently assume to be fact.

Before entering upon the conclusions to which I have been led in this inquiry, it will be well to note in chronological order the views of various authorities, in doing which I have found it necessary to include those dealing with the Tasmanians.

Mr. R. H. Davis<sup>1</sup> considered the Tasmanians to be scions of the Australians, and that their ancestors, being

<sup>1</sup> Davis, R. H., "The Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land," *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*. Tasmania and London, 1846.

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driven to sea in a canoe from the vicinity of King George's Sound, would, by the prevailing winds and currents, be apt to reach the western part of Van Diemen's Land. He selected that point of departure apparently for the reason that the word for "water" among the western tribes of Tasmania is similar to that used by the natives of Cape Leeuwen.

In 1839 Captain Robert Fitzroy,<sup>1</sup> in his narrative of the surveying voyages of the *Adventure* and the *Beagle*, between the years 1826 and 1836, attributes the origin of the aborigines of Tasmania and Australia either to a party of negroes who might have been driven by storms from the coast of Africa, and thus reached New Zealand or Van Diemen's Land, or to negroes escaping or being brought to the northern shores of Tasmania as slaves by "red men."

The conclusions of Dr. Pritchard<sup>2</sup> as to the derivation of the Tasmanians and Australians are noteworthy. They mark the great advance made in ethnology since the year 1847, but they also disclose the germs of those beliefs, as to the primitive races of mankind who inhabited the Australian and Melanesian regions and the Indo-Malayan Archipelago, which are now fairly established and accepted by ethnologists.

He goes back to primitive black tribes inhabiting "Oceania, Oceanic Negritia, or Oceanic Negroland," at a time when the "Malayo-Polynesian" race had not yet entered the Indian Archipelago.

He considered that this Negrito race was spread by way of New Guinea over the adjacent archipelago of islands, and that one branch took a more southerly course by the chain of islands ending at Timor, and lastly entered Australia.

In the same year Dr. Latham<sup>3</sup> stated in the Appendix to the narrative of the surveying voyage of the *Fly* during the years 1842-1846, that the Tasmanian language had

<sup>1</sup> Fitzroy, Captain Robert, *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of H.M. Ships "Adventure" and "Beagle" between the years 1826 and 1836*, vol. ii. p. 654. London, 1839.

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, Robert M., *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, vol. v. p. 214. London, 1847.

<sup>3</sup> Latham, Robert M., *Elements of Comparative Philology*. 1882.

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affinities with both the Australian and New Caledonian languages, but in a stronger degree with the latter. This, he considered, will at once explain the points of physical contrast between the Tasmanian tribes and those of Australia, and will indicate that the stream of population for Van Diemen's Land ran round Australia rather than across it.

Mr. Edward John Eyre<sup>1</sup> expressed the belief that there were grounds for the opinion that Australia was first peopled on its north-western coast, between the parallels of 12° and 16° South latitude. Thence he surmises that three great divisions branched out from the parent tribe, and from their offsets the whole continent was overspread.

Mr. M'Gillivray,<sup>2</sup> after quoting Eyre, Pritchard, and Latham, says that a common origin is implied by the belief in the unity of the Australian race. That it was not derived from New Guinea can scarcely be doubted, since Cape York and the neighbouring shores of the mainland are occupied by genuine and unmixed Australians, while islands of Torres Strait and the adjacent coast of New Guinea are occupied by equally genuine Papuans. Intermediate in position between the two races, and occupying the point of junction at the Prince of Wales Island, is the Kaurarega tribe (according to M'Gillivray), an Australian tribe altered by contact with the Papuan tribes of the adjacent island so as to resemble the latter in most of their physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics.

Mr. James Bonwick<sup>3</sup> devotes a long chapter to the origin of the Tasmanians. So far as I am able to gather, his views appear to be that at the time when a now sunken continent connected Tasmania with New Zealand on the east, and with Victoria on the west, the Tasmanians migrated therefrom and ranged round the coasts of the continent as the highway between what are now distinct lands.

He considers that the Australians came from the same

<sup>1</sup> Eyre, Edward John, *Journals of Exploration and Discovery into Central Australia*, p. 405. London, 1845.

<sup>2</sup> M'Gillivray, John, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M. Ship "Rattlesnake" during the years 1846-1850*, vol. ii. p. 81. London, 1852.

<sup>3</sup> Bonwick, Jas., *The Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, pp. 264, 265, 269. 1870.

centre as the Tasmanians, namely, the “sunken continent,” and therefore, in their emigrations, established themselves directly upon the south-western part of Australia, and possibly after the separation of Tasmania from it.

According to this author, the Tasmanians were then isolated for several or many thousand years from the world's progress, and he feels “wonder that the Tasmanians retained the speech and form of man and the strength of human thought, the power of human love.”

Professor Giglioli,<sup>1</sup> in the conclusion to his work on the Tasmanians, regards them as being Australians with the hair of Papuans, retaining, but in a primitive form, the habits and customs of the former, or, to speak more correctly, as being the descendants of an earlier black race with woolly hair who were settled in the continent of New Holland. The Tasmanians were the last remainder of that race, having been preserved through the isolation of their country.

He says, in conclusion, that the Tasmanians were members of the great Papuan family, and owed their inferiority to the complete state of isolation in which they had existed since a very remote epoch.

The Rev. William Ridley<sup>2</sup> appears to have held the view, although he states it with some hesitation, that the Australians passed from New Guinea, from island to island, to Cape York. Having found their way onwards to the south and west, the necessities and jealousies of the numerous families that followed them forbade their return.

Mr. H. Ling Roth,<sup>3</sup> in his most excellent work on *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, discusses the views of M. Topinard, Professor Huxley, Professor Friedrich Müller, MM. de Quatrefages and Haura, Dr. Garson, Mr. Barnard Davis, and other authorities, as to the origin of the Tasmanians. He says that it is quite impossible to define the race to which they were most closely allied, but that a comparison of their physical and mental characteristics tends to the

<sup>1</sup> Giglioli, E. H., *I Tasmaniani conni storice ed ethno ogici di un popolo estinto*, p. 147. Milan, 1874.

<sup>2</sup> Ridley, Rev. William, *Kamilaroi and other Australian Languages*, p. 119. Government Printer, Sydney, 1875.

<sup>3</sup> Roth, H. Ling, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, p. 224. London, 1890.

conclusion that the Tasmanians were more closely related to the Andaman Islanders than to any other race.

Mr. R. Brough Smyth,<sup>1</sup> in the introduction to his work on *The Aborigines of Victoria*, published in 1878, says that it is difficult to believe the Tasmanians were scions of the continental tribes, and that if Tasmania was peopled from Australia it was at a time when the latter supported a race that in feature, character, and language was Tasmanian.

As to the Australians, he says that they may have landed from Timor, but that it is doubtful if a canoeful of natives landed anywhere upon the coast of Australia could find subsistence. Yet he speaks of one stream of migration coming from the north-east, one branch of which following the coast southwards ultimately reached Gippsland; of the other which again dividing at the south-eastern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, one section took a course along the coast westward and southward to Western Australia, and the other followed the course of the rivers that flow southwards into Cooper's Creek and the Darling.

In *The Australian Race*, published in 1886, Mr. E. M. Curr<sup>2</sup> formulated a theory which may be condensed as follows, leaving those who desire to do so to peruse the reasons which are advanced in its support.

All tribes of Australia are descendants from one source, probably, indeed, from a shipload or canoeful of persons who originally found their way to these shores. According to the agreement between custom and language, they were negroes from Africa. These ancestors of the Australian race landed on the north-west coast many ages back, and their descendants spread themselves over the continent by travelling along the north, west, and east coasts, and also through the interior.

The Rev. John Mathew,<sup>3</sup> who has had opportunities of becoming personally acquainted with many examples of the aborigines, published an elaborate paper on that subject. He

<sup>1</sup> Smyth, R. Brough, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, p. lxii. *et infra*. Melbourne, 1878.

<sup>2</sup> Curr, E. M., *The Australian Race*, pp. 158-190. Melbourne, 1866.

<sup>3</sup> Mathew, Rev. John, "The Australian Aborigines," *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. xxiii. Sydney, 1889.

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considers them with regard to their origin, mythology, and traditions, their implements, customs, language, mental characteristics, food, institutions, and superstitions. He concludes that Australia was first occupied by a purely Papuan people, or possibly by a people produced by a fusion of Papuans and Melanesians sparsely and unevenly distributed over the continent. Taking for granted that the cradle of the human race was in Asia, he derives them from the north by way of New Guinea, and he looks upon the now extinct Tasmanians as the lineal descendants of the original Australians.

He then supposes Australia to be invaded by a more advanced fairer, straight-haired race which, arriving at a very early period of the world's history, perhaps on the north-west coast, poured into Central Australia with a generally south-easterly current. Partly driving before it, partly darkening itself by the tide of life upon which it pressed, the stream inundated the whole country, but not to an equal depth.

Finally, it is supposed that another invasion, apparently of Malays, took place from the north, first with some degree of continuity and then intermittently, winding about here and there, touching the shores at various places, and bending back inwards.

The author then says that upon the Papuan aborigines "the Dravidian influx" made a deep and general impression. The influence of the final arrivals, the Malays, was slighter and more partial.

Mr. R. Etheridge, junior, in a most valuable contribution on this subject, asked the question, "Has man a geological history in Australia?"<sup>1</sup> After reviewing the evidence derived from the discovery of stone axes, bone implements, oven mounds common in parts of Victoria, and the occurrence of a human molar in the Wellington Cave in New South Wales, he reaches the conclusion that the matter cannot be summed up better than by the Scotch verdict "not proven."

As to the Tasmanian aborigines, he remarks that the

<sup>1</sup> Etheridge, R., junior, "Has Man a Geological History in Australia?" *Proceedings of the Linnæan Society of New South Wales*, Second Series, vol. v. 1896, pp. 259-266.

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former geological connection of Australia and Tasmania appears to be a generally accepted fact, and that if such be the case, a vast period of time must have elapsed since that connection, allowing for the formation of Bass Strait. He very justly observes that herein lies one of the strongest proofs of man's early existence in the island continent, although trustworthy geological evidence is still wanting as to the approximate date of his first advent in Australia.

Dr. John Fraser has stated his views of the origin of the Australians in the introduction to his work, *An Australian Language*.<sup>1</sup> He holds that the negroid population of Australia originated in Babylonia, and that it was driven into southern India by the "confusion of tongues" which followed the attempt of Nimrod to establish dominion over his fellows. The overthrow of the Chaldæan monarchy, about 1500 B.C., by Arab tribes drove thousands of Kushites into southern India, where they took refuge in the mountains of the Deccan, and where to the present day there are Dravidian and Kolarian black-skinned and savage races.

The Babylonian Kushites are then supposed to have been driven out of India into the Malay Peninsula, Papua, and Timor by Dravidian tribes who came down from Central Asia. Finally they found their way into Australia.

These conclusions appear to rest mainly, if not altogether, upon philological deductions which also cause the author to argue that the Australians, the Dravidians, Malays, Papuans, Fijians, Samoans, and the New Hebrideans were at one time part of a common stock.

The latest work with which I am acquainted which expresses an opinion as to the derivation of the Australian aborigine is the second edition of Mr. G. W. Rusden's *History of Australia*.<sup>2</sup>

The author places the original site of the Australian stock among the Deccan tribes of Hindustan, and says that in a prehistoric time some powerful class or race of invaders

<sup>1</sup> Fraser, John, *An Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal*. Sydney, 1892.

<sup>2</sup> Rusden, G. W., *History of Australia*, second edition, pp. 84 *et seq.* Melbourne, 1897.

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sought to impose the peace of death upon the ancestors of the Australians. Their safety was in flight, and they migrated southwards from island to island until in Australia they marched free from molestation. The Tasmanians, he thinks, once occupied the mainland, and were driven southwards by some warlike or skilful tribes. Although to boat across Bass Strait in a canoe might be sometimes hazardous, yet in calm weather it would be easy, and the so-called catamarans of Southern Australia could not be filled with water or upset.

Such, then, are the views which have been recorded by various writers on the Tasmanian and Australian aborigines.

I shall now proceed to deal with this subject as it presents itself to me when looked at from the standpoint of present knowledge.

The level of culture of the Tasmanians is best indicated, apart from their customs and beliefs, by the primitive character of their weapons and implements. The former were a spear, which was merely a thin pole hardened and pointed in the fire, and a club which was also used as a missile weapon. Flints chipped on one side were used for cutting, scraping, and being held in the hand, without a handle, for chopping.<sup>1</sup>

The only means they had for navigating the waters was a rude raft, or a bundle of bark tied with grass or strips of kangaroo skin into a canoe-like shape, by which a river or a narrow strait of the sea, such as that between Maria Island or Bruni Island and the mainland, could be crossed in calm weather.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as pointed out by Dr. E. B. Tylor,<sup>3</sup> the Tasmanians were representatives of the stone-age development, in a stage lower than that of the Quaternary period of Europe, and the distinction may be claimed for them of being the lowest of modern nomad tribes. The Australians stand on a somewhat higher level than the Tasmanians. They are better armed, with a formidable reed spear propelled by the

<sup>1</sup> Roth, H. Ling, *op. cit.* chap. iv.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* chap. iv. p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Tylor, E. B., "On the Tasmanians as Representatives of Palæolithic Man," *Journal Anthropol. Inst.* November 1893.



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throwing-stick, the boomerang, and a variety of clubs which serve either at close quarters or as missiles, and for defence they have the shield. Their canoes are far in advance of the raft or the bundle of bark of the Tasmanians, and are able if necessary to cross narrow arms of the sea under circumstances where the latter would have been destroyed.

Their stone implements are either ground to an edge or fashioned by chipping, as among tribes living where material for the ground and polished type of hatchet is not procurable. But even in such cases these are obtained by barter from other tribes.

The Australians may therefore be classed as representing hunting tribes of the Neolithic age.

Some of the writers whose opinions I have quoted have either stated in so many words, or have left it to be inferred by their statements, that the Tasmanians reached this continent by canoe or ship.

But there is not a tittle of evidence in support of the belief that the Tasmanians ever were acquainted with the art of constructing a canoe able to cross such a sea strait as that between Tasmania and Australia, much less wider extents of ocean. On the contrary, the whole of their culture was on a par with the rudeness of their bark rafts.

I have long since come to the conclusion that one of the fundamental principles to be adopted in discussing the origin of those savages must be, that they reached Tasmania at a time when there was a land communication between it and Australia.

It is only in the work of Professor Giglioli that I have found this clearly shown, where he says that there is no instance recorded of a people who have lost the art of navigation which they had once acquired.<sup>1</sup>

The Australians have also been credited by most authors with arriving in canoes or ships on the coasts of Australia.

But I am quite unable to understand how, since these authors picture them as settling down upon and then spreading along the coasts, they should have lost the art of constructing sea-going canoes, which would be as necessary

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 146.

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to them as to the southern sea-coast tribes of New Guinea or to the islanders of Torres Strait of the present time. There is no evidence of such a degeneration in culture, and before this belief can be accepted as a settled proposition, some evidence in support of it must be forthcoming.

It might, however, be urged that the tribes living on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula and of the Australian coast of Torres Strait, as far as Port Darwin, are acquainted with and use outrigger canoes, and therefore may represent the condition of the first arrivals. As to this, the observations of the earlier navigators, and especially of those engaged in surveying voyages, are much to the point.

Mr. M'Gillivray, speaking of the year 1847,<sup>1</sup> says that the canoes seen in Rockingham Bay were constructed of a single sheet of bark brought together at the ends and secured by stitching. Near Shelbourne Bay, on the east side of Cape York Peninsula, they were constructed of a tree trunk with a double outrigger, "and altogether a poor instance of these used by the islanders of Torres Strait." Further on, when at Cape York, he speaks of the ordinary outrigger canoe of the Straits, and of the friendly intercourse existing between the "natives of the southern portion of Torres Strait and those of the mainland about Cape York."<sup>2</sup>

These observations indicate the distance to which a knowledge of the outrigger canoe, derived from the islanders of the Straits, had passed southward at the time spoken of by Mr. M'Gillivray. To this may be added that according to oral information, for which I am indebted to Dr. R. L. Jack, the use of the outrigger canoe extends now as far southward as Hinchinbrook Island.

As to the knowledge of the outrigger canoe by the Australians on the western part of the shores of Torres Strait, Mr. M'Gillivray also mentions that two years after the founding of the English settlement at Raffles Bay in 1827, the Bugis had taken advantage of the protection afforded to carry on trepang fishing, and that formerly bark canoes had been in general use by the aborigines, but that

<sup>1</sup> M'Gillivray, *op. cit.* pp. 81, 119, 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* vol. i. pp. 141-146.