

Doctor Outspoken About Pitiful Plight of Aborigines

PLIGHT OF ABORIGINES EXCITES DOCTOR'S HORROR

Pitiful Conditions of Half-Castes Revealed in Outspoken Letter to Minister

MEDICAL ATTENTION NEEDED

SO much interest has been aroused by the publication of extracts from, and commentaries upon, the letter in which Dr. W. D. Walker tells the Minister for Home and Territories of the shocking condition of the Central Australian aborigines, that a brief summary of the more arresting parts of this communication is clearly demanded.

DURING 15 months Dr. and Mrs. Walker travelled 6,000 miles in South, Central, and North Australia, and the doctor himself also covered 1,000 miles on camels in the McDonnell Ranges.

DR. Walker found the uncivilized blacks "happy and healthy;" but those in contact with white men, and "the pitiable horde of half-castes," excited his horror and amazement.

THE letter contains many outspoken statements about the causes which contribute to the multiplication of the half-caste population of Central Australia. "A man constantly without the company of white women and always in the company of aborigines," says Dr. Walker, "gradually loses his finer feelings, and becomes not merely immoral, but unashamedly unamoral."

There are so few white women in the interior because, among other disabilities, there is, in ordinary circumstances, no doctor for 1,300 miles north and south between Oodnadatta and Port Darwin, and for 1,600 miles east and west between Roebourne and Cloncurry. "Is there anywhere else in the civilized world that can claim this unenviable distinction?" asks Dr. Walker, who favours the suggested inauguration of an aerial medical service at Alice Springs.

"One rarely finds disease among the wild aborigines; but there are many aborigines around the fringes of settlement and on the various stations suffering from various severe illnesses. Like the native fruits and grasses, the herbs with which they are wont to treat their ills are eaten by our cattle, and so the aborigine on the outskirts of civilization is no longer

SAYS MISSIONS CARE MORE FOR SOUL THAN BODY

AS a prelude to strong condemnation of the Central Australian missions, Dr. Walker says it is presumptions on our part and quite useless to try to force our religious beliefs upon the natives. "There are many roads to Victor Harbour, and no one knows which is the best until he gets there. . . . The aborigine belongs to another age, and it behoves us to let him carry on his tribal customs unmolested as in the days before we came. I have never seen any real good arise from missionary activities, neither at Point McLeay, Point Pearce, Alice Springs, or Hermannsburg.

"At Hermannsburg Lutheran mission station, 80 miles west of Alice Springs, which is also a large cattle station, the missionary is an earnest man who lays more stress on the salvation of the aboriginal souls than on their physical welfare.

"I have talked to managers and owners of many stations in the north and not one of them will employ mission-trained aborigines if he can possibly avoid it. They are cheeky, lazy, and unreliable, and expect to be fed and paid the award wage of £2 per week whether they earn it or not.

"Miss Locke, who has established a mission at Harding Soak, about 100 miles north of Alice Springs, has accomplished one useful thing, in that she has gathered together about 50 sick and diseased aborigines from all the surrounding country. Here with zealous faith she attempts to heal them. They are the most miserable, unhappy, and unhealthy group that I have ever seen."

Dr. Walker writes devastatingly of "the inadequate premises in Alice Springs known as 'The Bungalow,' which have been the 'temporary' home of the half-caste children in that town for the past

able to apply his usual remedies and has nowhere to turn when illness overtakes him, and gradually becomes chronically afflicted.

"Now," proceeds Dr. Walker, "even if (as is unfortunately so frequently the case in the interior) one cares nothing for the welfare of the aborigines, we must all admit that when diseased he should at least be the recipient of medical attention, lest his disease be conveyed by various means to others—white included—chief of these means being the flies. Suppose an aborigine has ulcers—flies are on these ulcers one minute and in the white man's eyes and on his food the next minute.

"The wife of the manager of a station in the MacDonnell Ranges was bitten by a fly, and had to go 1,100 miles to Adelaide to be treated by a specialist. It took six months to save her eye.

"The presence of a medical man in the community would enable the white man to bring his wife into the interior without the qualms which so frequently prevent his doing so under present conditions. Thus would we have white children born instead of half-castes, and then would Alice Springs no longer have 70 half-caste children and only five white ones.

14 years. . . . It was . . . ally built, I believe, for 12 children; now the same place houses 70 of them. It is a reproach to the department responsible for its surveillance."

Illustrating Dr. Walker's letter, there are flashlight photographs showing the half-castes asleep on the ground outside the bungalow, "like sardines in a tin," male and female side by side, as many as five on one blanket in an area not greater than 10 yards by seven. . . . "I doubt if they could all lie down much less sleep inside that shameful structure," writes Dr. Walker. "Their ages vary from birth to 25 years, babies are born among this crowded mass of humanity without any privacy whatsoever."

Dr. Walker's comments on the moral questions involved are characteristically frank. The bungalow, he says, which is within 30 yards of the rear entrance to the hotel, should be enclosed by a 10-ft. iron fence, and the gate locked at sunset.

"It is high time," he added, "that permanent water was found at Jay Creek, 30 miles west of Alice Springs, and the 70 half-castes removed thereto and decently housed."

In conclusion, Dr. Walker tells how at Alice Springs he treated an aborigine, the local police tracker, who had had his skull "chopped open" by three native prisoners. "To my surprise and every one else's he recovered. I was then regarded as almost super-human by the superstitious aborigines. They allowed me to attend their corroborees, and even to take flashlight photographs of their rites. I thus gained their absolute confidence—a privilege which is accorded to only a few white men. I think, therefore, that the information embodied in this letter may be regarded as authentic."

THE ABORIGINES.

A DOCTOR'S REPORT.

A report has been furnished by Dr. W. D. Walker to the Minister for Home and Territories on the Aborigines of Australia. Dr. Walker, with Mrs. Walker, during the last 15 months, travelled over 6,000 miles by motor in South Australia, Central and North Australia, and the doctor also covered 1,000 miles in the McDonnell Ranges and other parts, and took over 3,000 photographs. He went almost from end to end of the McDonnell Ranges, and visited the Arltunga gold and mica diggings (80 miles east), then the ruby diggings at Florence Creek (125 miles north-east), the Hermannsburg Mission Station, the celebrated Valley of Palms (90 miles west), and finally went 750 miles on camels out west in the McDonnell Ranges, beyond Haast's Bluff, Mount Wedge, and Yalh-yalh. Here he was amongst wild and naked aborigines, many of whom had but rarely if ever seen white men before. They were happy and healthy—fine specimens of an interesting race. Here they had a living ethnological museum where anthropologists might still study one of the earliest of human races—a veritable man of the Stone Age almost as he was in the beginning. Towards the outposts of civilised settlement the aborigines had acquired some or other variety of covering to their nakedness. This was not to their advantage for they were happier, healthier, and cleaner when quite naked.

The White Man and the Aboriginal.

The advent of the white man sounded the death knell of the black man—if not in this generation, in the next—and all that survived him was a pitiable horde of half-castes. The life of the aboriginal on the outskirts of civilisation was not a happy one. "We appropriate his country and drive him farther and farther back," he remarks. "The white man kills his kangaroos and emus, but he may not kill the white man's cattle or sheep, although these same animals eat up the grasses, from whose seeds he makes his meal, and also eat the herbs with which he was accustomed to treat his ills, and the wild fruits upon which he depends for his food other than meat. If he spears cattle or sheep, a punitive expedition is sent out and he is brought into captivity in chains as a prisoner and made to work in the gaol. Our methods of justice are not understood by the simple aboriginal mind, and the question might in all sincerity be raised, 'is this justice?' Arsenic and the rifle were freely used by many of the early settlers to disperse the aboriginal from his own country."

Aboriginal Reserves.

The proclamation of aboriginal reserves was the subject of much controversy, and was admittedly useless unless the reserve be in good country, well watered and plentifully stocked with native game. The doctor wholeheartedly subscribed to the recent suggestions of Dr. Basedow that a large tract of land about 300 miles by 200 miles (extending parallel to a line between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, but 200 miles west of this line extending to the Western Australian border, and even into Western Australian territory) embracing Mann, Everard, Pieterman, and the west end of the McDonnell Ranges be set aside entirely as an aboriginal reserve, and that a similar tract be set aside in Arnhem Land, and also one each in the North-West of Western Australia and in the Gulf district of Queensland. Thus would many full-blooded aborigines be preserved in their natural state, unaffected by civilisation, and governed by their own customs without interference.

With the proposal for the establishment of a separate State in North Australia for detribalised and half-caste natives Dr. Walker does not agree. He said he could see no way of preserving those detribalised aborigines already in contact with civilisation. It would be hopeless to expect full-blooded aborigines to associate on equal terms with half-castes any more than to expect the white man to do so. As more white women went into the interior, the half-castes would diminish in numbers pari passu. The best and quickest way to accomplish this was to have the Administrator in Central Australia a medical man, and to open aerial communication between the interior and the more populous areas.

Duty of the Government.

It was the duty of the Federal Government to deal fairly with the remainder of this people. The aboriginal who was in continual contact with whites on stations and in small out-back towns absorbed only those customs which were of the least benefit to him and more of the white man's vices than of his virtues. One rarely found disease amongst the wild aborigines, but there were many aborigines round the fringes of civilised settlements and on the various stations in the interior suffering from various severe illnesses. The policy of providing Government rations and blankets for the aged and infirm aborigines was good, but frequently the method of administration left much to be desired. Aborigines were notorious socialists, and the custom of giving out rations once a week was unsatisfactory, because on the first day the whole camp shared the supplies intended only for the aged ones, which latter must therefore more or less starve for the rest of the week. The policy instituted at Alice Springs and Hermannsburg of erecting permanent huts for the natives was not in the best interests of the aborigines. They certainly presented a more attractive appearance, but in reality were very unhealthy.

The Register

NEWS - PICTORIAL

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 1929

BLACK PICTURE OF BLACK MEN

CIVILIZED communities which pride themselves on their refinement even more than upon their culture, in the sense in which the words are far from synonymous, are strangers to the grosser sort of candour, and see no small part of life through a veil of convention, which, however desirable from one point of view, is no aid to the sense of vision. Life itself, if it is not seen as a whole, is not seen truly. There is this notable consolation, however—that some things in this world are not pleasant to look at directly, and that a refined society, by reason of its refinement, avoids intimate contact with many an unpleasant truth. Among the unpleasant truths which are largely hidden from the people of Australia, is the truth about the detribalised aborigines of this country.

EXCEPT from considerations of public decency, it is a thousand pities that no one can print and publish broadcast throughout the Commonwealth the letter, and the accompanying photographs, sent to the Minister for Home and Territories by Dr. W. D. Walker, and alluded to in *The Register* yesterday by *Rufus*. It would not do to permit this revelation to leave Australia. Such proof of our neglect of our elementary duty towards the survivors of the primitive race dispossessed of this country by the act of British settlement, such appalling evidence of the consequences of that neglect, such an indictment of official ineptitude and public apathy, if presented to the world, would be placed on record to our everlasting shame.

DR. WALKER, when he prepared this hideous document, was not writing a formal report. He had not been invited to tour Central Australia with a bucket of whitewash, or studiously to ignore the evidence of his senses, in order to discover the excellence of this system of administration or that. He went north of his own volition, and, in writing to the Government, therefore, felt at full liberty to call a spade a spade. He did not compose his letter for a printing press at Canberra, but for the eye of the Minister. His photographs were not taken with a view to their reproduction in a blue-book, but to make it impossible for anyone to reject as incredible such a story of misery and squalor as, in this country at least, ought to be as beyond belief as, in detail, it is unfit for public discussion.

INTO Dr. Walker's proposals for the ultimate healing of the sore which we are permitting to fester in the heart of this country, it is not now desirable to enter. In every direction, he treads upon ground of controversy, and especially in condemning missionary activity as far worse than useless. His disclosures are of immediate importance, chiefly in relation to the present state of health of the natives on the fringes of settlement, who are not only a danger to one another, he declares, but a centre of infection which menaces the white man also.

INNUMERABLE millions of flies, carrying the germs of disease and death from the ulcerated bodies of the neglected blacks into the isolated homes of the settlers, are the disgusting background for Dr. Walker's picture of Central Australian hygiene. This state of affairs is in itself a disgrace to our boasted civilization. As a first step in the direction of the discharge of our responsibilities to the hapless natives, it is urgently necessary that we should afford them the medical attention of which, chiefly because of the ravages of the white man's diseases, they stand so distressingly in need. The motive of self-defence—not very exalted in the circumstances—should move us at last.