

A world traveler, Scotch by ancestry and German by choice, points out that primitive people are acquiring all the appurtenances of civilization at a time when civilization itself is losing the enthusiasm that has kept the ancient races going throughout the ages.

Primitives *and* Civilization

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THE most primitive people in the world, and those who bear the closest resemblance to prehistoric mankind, are the Australian aborigines. It is true that the Kubus, who live in the mysterious forests of central Sumatra, are perhaps still more primitive, but we have almost no authentic knowledge about them.

It is not so amazing that the natives of Australia, both men and women, go about without a stitch of clothing, for various African tribes, such as the Kavirondos and Shilluks, do the same thing and yet cannot be called primitive in the strict sense of the word. But the Australian blacks have no houses or domestic animals and, except for their weapons, only the simplest tools, notably a kind of

bark container in which the women carry all their possessions. Their graves are marked with a plant that has edible roots.

We have therefore every reason to regard the Australian blacks as the perfect type of prehistoric, hunting, tribal people. They know nothing whatever about cattle-raising and agriculture. They live in the jungles and desert, nourishing themselves entirely on what the men get hunting and fishing and what the women pick. Their only protection against inclement weather is the most primitive kind of shelter. When it is pleasant they sleep stark naked on the bare ground like animals. Let me make it quite clear how far we must go back into antiquity to find, among the an-

cestors of the civilized peoples of to-day, European or otherwise, a form of life as primitive as that of the Australian aborigines. We should have to go back beyond the Bronze and Stone Ages to find equally primitive folk, for the later Stone Age knew something about agriculture, pottery, and building houses, and in certain parts of the world there were even farmyards and fortifications at that time. We must go far back into the diluvial epoch before we encounter a form of life resembling that of the present Australian blacks.

This means that an almost fantastic period of time lies between us and these people who are still living on the earth to-day. If we reckon the late paleolithic epoch as extending from 15000 to 35000 B.C. we place the diluvial epoch at about fifty thousand years before the birth of Christ. Of course, any reckoning of this kind is more or less vague, but it is at least certain that the span of time that separates us from the evolutionary stage that the Australian blacks have reached must be some tens of thousands of years long.

These last remnants of primitive humanity are no longer being exterminated like a kind of pestilence. Attempts are being made to civilize them on public reservations that have been set up in the Australian Commonwealth, where an amazing discovery has been made. Take any child from any wild tribe, put it in a reservation, and send it to school and it learns reading and writing, arithmetic and geography just like a white child. I visited a mission school in Queensland where black children attended the same classes as the white children of the missionaries and gov-

ernment officials. I visited the classes and could not notice any difference at all between the accomplishments of the children of civilization and the children of the bush. In fact, I could not help noticing that the little black children knew their lessons slightly better and made slightly fewer mistakes than our own six-year-old Ralph, who had accompanied us on our journey across Australia and had received his first schooling in Sydney.

Now people generally say—and I have heard this before in connection with Africa—that natives are able to learn more rapidly and easily than whites while they are still small children but that a point soon comes at which they fall hopelessly behind. That may be so, but it is by no means certain, and even if it is true it is hardly surprising. The extraordinary, in fact, the astounding thing is that a child of parents whose cultural level is extremely primitive can learn to read and write comparatively easily. If a primitive whose forbears had lived in civilized surroundings for three generations needed a whole lifetime to learn the fundamentals of reading and writing, even that would be an amazing achievement in the light of evolutionary theory. For what is left of all evolution if the whole experience, the whole training, the whole heritage of knowledge and intellectual skill accumulated over thousands and tens of thousands of years can be acquired in a few generations?

And it is being acquired within a few generations, even within a few years. In the Negro university of the Scotch mission in Natal I met black students who had come straight from the kraal to the mission school to study theology and medicine and who

were the equals of any white student in respect to both knowledge and intelligence.

I was astounded, but I did not give much thought to the matter. Now in the native schools of Australia I encountered the same thing over again as I watched a primitive people acquiring the knowledge and skill of our time with amazing speed. I thought of Webster and Simon, our servant boys in Central Africa, who spoke and wrote perfect English and knew Ki-Swahili as well as their native dialect. Within a few weeks they had picked up so much German from our conversation that they understood everything we were saying and were able to use a few German expressions correctly themselves.

The South Sea schools tell the same story that the schools for Australian natives do. The young children who attend them were lifted out of the Stone Age and set down in the middle of our civilization and they at once began acting as if they had drunk in our ideas and intellectual capacities with their mother's milk.

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In the light of the European theory of evolution, it is terrifying and profoundly strange to see how quickly our knowledge and technical civilization can be taken over and imitated by other races that stand far behind us in respect to evolutionary development. But we Europeans are much too wrapped up in ourselves and our tempo of life is too rapid for us to be alarmed when we make this discovery. When we take the trouble to reflect about it at all we usually console ourselves with the thought that the most

that other people can do is to imitate our accomplishments, that they are not yet able to do things for themselves.

This may be self-deception but there is something in it. In fact, it hits the nail on the head, only we do not draw the necessary conclusions when they begin to look unpleasant. Yes, our whole civilization and all our knowledge can be taught and transferred; they can even be made available to a primitive whose oversized head has not been filled with the thousands and tens of thousands of years of intellectual training that we Europeans have behind us.

Recognition of this fact also throws a bright side-light on our own situation. During the last century we not only have assembled a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience but have made it available and palatable and have predigested it. We have developed methods of communication that make it more than easy for anyone to acquire this knowledge. All that is necessary in order to pass examinations and become an expert is a good memory and such modest intellectual equipment as even a savage possesses. This also explains the otherwise inexplicable fact that Zulus or Arandas from the Australian bush not only learn to read and write, which was a privilege that only a small educated class was entitled to during the Middle Ages, but that many of them acquire academic training with ease. If our sixteen- or seventeen-year-old children of both sexes are discussing the most difficult problems to-day it is not because they are more intellectually mature than the previous generation but merely because the ground has been prepared for them.

One recognizes this to be the case when one looks at the situation from the other side and sees the helplessness of these same young people, who do not know how to begin using the vast wealth of material they have mastered. They have been born into a period that offers greater opportunities than any previous period, yet they can think of nothing better to do than to complain and criticize because it opens up no field of activity to them, because they have only learned to continue to follow the path that was laid down for them and are perplexed when they suddenly run up against a wall, even if this wall is merely the act of practising a profession.

What is the use of all this education if it does not enable them to manage the little sorrows of life that the savage overcomes so easily and under much more difficult circumstances? For one does not need to have accumulated knowledge for years and decades in order to come to the final, distressing conclusion that life is a difficult, dangerous business.

A seer, a wise man, has always been the kind of person who not only was able to confront the sorrows and miseries of life for himself but could also draw upon the treasures of his knowledge and wisdom to help others and become their support and strength and leader. Measured by this standard, what do the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands who are coming to maturity and receiving doctor's

degrees all over the world amount to? Of course there are many virtuous, laborious drones among them; in fact, these form the vast majority. They are indispensable in the huge hive of modern science and modern civilization. They work hard and keep building larger things.

But this academic proletariat, not only in Europe and America but all over the world, in India, Japan, and China, has learned only one calling and is trained in only one specialty. It has not learned how to live profoundly or how to master life, and thus it may become a danger to the material culture of the West. By this I do not mean that the unemployed, educated proletariat that is trained to perform difficult tasks represents political dynamite, although this is largely the case in India and China. The chief danger lies elsewhere.

The danger is that the elements that ought to play a leading part in society are infected with universal boredom and lack of interest and are losing intellectual vigor, which in the long run is indispensable to keep the machine of civilization in operation. Life can be maintained only by the life impulse itself, by generation and procreation, spiritual as well as physical. Just as each individual must always be ready to solve new problems in a new way, so must every nation and every culture be ready to act. Thus the otherwise inexplicable spiritual crisis of the West suddenly becomes clear.