

ANCIENT CIVILISATION

DID AUSTRALIA HAVE ONE.

It has been said that Australia is a land singularly lacking in romance. As a community we are scarcely more than a century old. Everything about us is new. We have no traditions, or very few of them; no history, no picturesque past except one we are anxious to forget; no dark ages, and no ruins. The country is supposed to be very old—some scientists say it is the oldest country in the world, but that apparently is the only old thing about it. For the rest, we are to the romanticist impossibly and hopelessly new, and we are rather given the impression that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves, although, of course it is not our fault that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves, although of course it is not our fault that we are as we are. An all-wise Creator decreed that Australia should be the last land discovered and settled by civilised man, and we have to put up with that.

At the same time there is no reason why we should not have some of these things. Although the advent of the white man to these shores has been comparatively recent, there have been black men here for many thousands of years—at least that is the popular supposition based on scientific data, and there is nobody to say that such a theory is not correct. All the available evidence points to the settlement of Australia by black people at a period over 100,000 years ago. It is fairly conclusive evidence, based on our knowledge of the world at that period and the legends and habits of the blacks themselves. We can therefore concede the point that Australia was in the hands of the blacks anything from 100,000 to 250,000 years ago.

The question now arises whether the aborigines as we know them were ever any different; whether they are the remnants of some dead and gone civilisation and whether there are somewhere in the heart of this continent ruins or other evidences of that civilisation. Other countries are rich in these things. Asia and Africa have had many of them. China was civilised thousands of years ago. Babylon, Nineveh, Carthage, Egypt, and others all had their

thage, Egypt, and others all had their hour. In Peruvian South America there are relics of the great Inca civilisation, but in Australia what have we? The romance of archaeology is denied us. We do not dig in the old river bed for flints and bronzes, because we know we would find nothing. All the records ever discovered of past ages in Australia are represented by a few clumsy drawings on rocks—things which are common to any type of aborigines. Not a papyrus or a

record of any kind has been unearthed. No strange hieroglyphics have been detected to keep scientists awake at night. Sir Baldwin Spencer and a few others have recorded certain aboriginal legends which by reason of the method of their perpetuation must be unreliable, to say the least of them. There is nothing therefore to tell us whether any ancient civilisation existed in Australia before the white man came, and even if it did exist there is nothing to tell us about it. The conclusion must be come to, therefore, that no such civilisation existed and that the people of this country before the white man were never anything better than they are now, or were before they became extinct.

The Australian aboriginal is not a beautiful specimen as a rule, nor does he stand high among primitive peoples. On the contrary, he is at the bottom of the intelligence list. He is regarded by science as survival of ancient and primitive man. He is even more primitive than those specimens like the Piltdown person and others, whose skulls were dug up in England some time ago to set scientists chattering. No remains dug up in Europe have ever been so primitive as our aborigines. Some time ago the brain capacity of 24 Australian native women were measured. Their mean capacity was 1116 c.c. Four of them were under 1000 c.c. and one was as low as 939 c.c. The last-named was just about as close to the ape as it was possible for her to be. When a brain measures below 939 c.c., it is not expected to contain human intelligence. Of all the races of mankind living to day, the Australian aboriginal alone could serve as a common ancestor for all modern races. Such a common ancestor would have to yield descendants which would have to de-

descendants which would have to develop into the central African negro, as well as into the fair haired native of north-western Europe. According to Dr. Arthur Keith, the Australian native has those intermediate and generalised characters, needed for such an ancestral form. The truth of the matter seems to be that we lack past civilisations in Australia because the country was originally populated by primitive man, who being out of touch with the rest of the world, remained as he was over thousands of centuries and never progressed.

Civilisations began when nations rose beyond the Stone Age. The Australian aboriginal has just entered the Stone Age and no more. He has not gone through all the phases of that age. One of the features of the Stone Age at its fullest development is the presence of pottery. The Australian aboriginal never became a potter. The theory is that he drifted down on to this continent over land bridges from India or thereabouts at a time when Asia her-

self had not developed the potter's thumb. The land bridges vanished or were swept into the sea, and Australia was cut off from the rest of the world along with portions of Oceania. When Asia and Europe were developing pottery, the Australians had long since been cut off from them, and all advances in material progress were unknown to them.

The theory seems to be feasible enough. The aborigines are said to have started coming here between 100,000 and 250,000 years ago. They were probably cut off from the rest of the world a few centuries later. The ancient civilisations of which we know something were not so ancient after all. A mere 10,000 years ago will dispose of all of them without any trouble; but the Australian aborigines were here in their primitive state 100,000 years before any civilisation at all. Everything, according to one scientist, goes to show that the Australians have never been in contact with a civilised race. Their stone implements are rude and less skilfully worked than the majority of the native implements found in Europe. Other facts point to the constantly primitive nature of the Australian aborigine. The Tasmanian natives were the first to get here. As

Australian aborigine. The Tasmanian natives were the first to get here. As they worked south they were followed by other tribes, which remained on the mainland. The Tasmanians were even more primitive than those who came after, the interference being that in between the two migrations some progress had been made by man which the Tasmanians escaped, by reason of the fact that their land bridge connecting them with Victoria disappeared, and they were cut off from everyone. The Tasmanian aboriginals, when they lived, were on a lower plane than any people on the face of the earth, or known to have existed for many thousands of years previously. They were, in fact, the bedrock of humanity.

So, in view of all these facts, is there any sense in hunting about Australia for Tutankhamen tombs and such like things, when we feel that the quest would be fruitless? Some people answer Yes, and there is one man at least who has been persistently hunting for relics of past ages for some time. He has not found anything yet, but he is full of hope. It is a remarkable fact that no fossil remains of man have ever been discovered in Australia; but then nobody had ever looked much for them, and there is no sense in trying for fossils when you have in the flesh, the type of person who would be fossilised. A skull of 100,000 years ago would probably be no different from an aboriginal skull to-day. Everything points to that being so. But science is not prepared to stop there. The land which has given up the bones of the diprotodon and other giant marsupials may deliver an altogether new set of human bones, which may make the scientific world readjust all its notions of the whole scheme of things. Possibly one reason why we have no human fossils is because we are a very sparsely settled people, and no building or excavation has been going on in spots most likely to yield results. There is some very old country along the Barwon River, and it is there our solitary archaeologist is wooing the past. In the deep-down layer of the old river bed there may be remnants of some romantic era wherein Australian kings flourished and warred and carried off the beautiful daughters of their neighbours, and generally conducted themselves as ancient kings should. And then again there may not.