

Adelaide, June 12, 1839.

My dear Sir,

A full year has elapsed since I last saw you, and yet is this the first time that I take up my pen to Write to you. Such long silence you must, I conceive, find unaccountable, but I hope that the reasons I have to adduce for it will sufficiently excuse me. A sea voyage, grand and impressive as it is in itself, furnishes but very little worth of communication, besides I knew that my colleague Mr Teichelmann reported to you our safe arrival in this country; and as for our inquiries and doings in regard to the Aborigines, I could not make up my mind to write immature or not fully ascertained things. But the present communication of such matters and facts, upon the truth and certainty of which you may depend, will in some measure, I hope, recompense you for my long silence.

To begin then with my own personal affairs, you know already of the pecuniary difficulty which we met with on our arrival as also how it was got over. To prevent similar occurrences, some christian gentlemen, of whom Mr McLaren and Rev. Stow were the first, united to support us with the sum of 100£ for the first year, until our friends in Europe could be acquainted with our situation; and if it had not been for this material support, we should have been badly off indeed, as you may infer from the immense prices of every necessary for life. The first eight days we lived with Mr Lester in your house, till we got our tent out of the ship's hold. Desirous to be in as close connexion with the natives as possible, we applied for the Protector's permission of pitching our tent on their location, where there are several huts built for them, and he not only granted that, but allowed us also to occupy the wooden schoolhouse, which was not then used. But as this house was not originally intended for a European residence, so it was unfit for it, in fact the cold nights had such an ill effect on Mr Teichelmann's health in this airy habitation, that he fell dangerously sick of this dysentery. The Governor, seeing this or being told of it by the Protector, gave order to build new houses for us on the north side of the river Torrens, to where the location is now removed and where three little houses are built for three native families with their assistance.

Eight months is a short period for any missionary, even under circumstances the most favorable, much more so for us. All we could do, was to study the language, manners, habits and notions of the Aborigines; and though I must confess before the Omniscient that I could have been more diligent and attentive, and that I am an useless servant, yet I can say without pride or praise of myself, that I now know more, if not of the language, at least of the notions and manners of the natives, than any person in the colony. Some persons have blamed us that we did not proceed immediately to instruct the natives by means of the english language, but dayly experience corroborates what judgement at first led us to think, namely that it is altogether impracticable, at least as yet, to instruct the natives by means of the english language, especially on religious and moral subjects. Although my knowledge of the language is increasing slowly and as yet very limited, the number of words, (not

including compound words which are very frequent) in my possession not being upwards of a thousand, yet I can make myself understood on many subjects. The most prominent feature of the language is the dual number in the nouns and pronouns and the prepositions being postpositions. The former, the dual number, seems to prevail throughout all New Holland, for I find it in Mr Threlkeld's Grammar and in the dialect spoken by the 'Wirramu-meyu', or Encounter Bay men; both which languages are so different from the Adelaide and northern dialect, that I could only now and then trace a resemblance, for instance in the pronouns.

As regards the manners of the South Australian Aborigines, they have many in common with other Polynesians, as tattooing, painting themselves with red color, polygamy, etc. But there seems also to exist a sort of limited polyandry, in as much as the brothers of a husband have a secondary claim to his wife. At first I was much struck that whenever I got a married native brother (for I have many adoptive brothers and other relatives among the Aborigines) he would say, his wife was ours, not knowing the connexion between brotherhood and this kind of polyandry. Hitherto it was generally believed as also by myself, that there were no chiefs among the natives, but I recently ascertained that there is at least something very similar to chieftainship. They call such a man Burka, i.e. a hoary old man, (exactly corresponding with the Latin, Senator) and his distinction is that the Unyawaieti play (Corrobbery the Europeans call it) is his, and that he has the honor of directing it. This dignity is hereditary from father to son. The present Burka of the Adelaide tribe is called 'Kua Kartameru' by his countrymen, King John by the Europeans, and has four wives, more than any other native, that I know of. The Unyawaieti before alluded to is a play, at which the women sing and beat with their hands on their shins wrapped up like a muff, in a sitting posture, while the men dance, flourishing their weapons and roaring like lions. Besides this they have another play, at which the men, ornamented with white stripes on their faces, breasts and knees, and a wreath of green leaves round their legs, stamp alternatively with their feet on the ground at such a tremendous rate, that large clouds of dust rise towards the sky. Three are stamping at a time, when one is tired, he sits down on the ground, which is accompanied by a loud shout of the rest, and another comes forward in his place.

When we first came in the colony, they had this play almost every evening, this being the time of their amusements, but now never. This is owing to the fact that this play goes from one tribe to another, for they tell, that they laid it down at a distance, from where another man fetched it, but by and by it would come back. To this custom the name of the play appears to refer, as they call it Kuri, which signifies a ring or anything round. Many of the manners of the Aborigines evidently bear an oriental character, as for instance circumcision, which they practise in almost all ages; their loud lamentations over dead persons, every one repeating the name which the deceased bore as his relative, the one crying, my father, my father, another, my brother, my brother, etc., etc., see Jeremiah 22, 18.

Further, their mode of burying, which I described some time ago in the Gazette, which I herein inclose and whereto I will only add, that the ceremonies with the corpse are a sort of oracle to find out the supposed murderer. The Kadliadli [corpse] whose part is performed by the deceased's nearest relative, turns round involuntarily and runs away as soon as the murderer's name is mentioned in the series of names that are repeated.

It has been and is still generally thought that the Australian Aborigines have no other original religious ideas and notions than a few superstitious traditions of evil spirits. That they believe in such beings is certain, and Kuinyo, who is probably one and the same with the Guinyar of New South Wales, is the first among them; but that they besides these negative have also some positive and better ideas, is not less certain. Of first importance for us as their missionaries is their strong belief in immortality. When a good man dies, his soul flies, as they express it, upwards or to heaven, where there are plenty of kangaroos and other food. Bad men, one person told me, go down into a great fire, but I am not sure if he had not heard that from an European. Munaintyerlo, who of old lived on earth, but who sits now above, has made the sun, moon and stars, the earth and the visible world in general. As soon as I got this name, I substituted it for the hitherto used Jehova, which they could scarcely pronounce. I told them of the creation, of the incarnation, sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension of the son of God, and I had the satisfaction of seeing not only that I was perfectly understood but also that I created a deep interest. If further discoveries do not show that they combine too pagan and absurd ideas with the name Munaintyerlo, I mean to retain it for the name of God.

Tindoyerlimeyu, (literally, the sunfather man) is the personified and deified sun. Of him it is believed that he had many wives, who are very good, but also some long sisters, who are very bad, probable that by the two latter the planets and comets is referred to. Tindoyerlimeyu has power over life and death, as appears from the following. The moon (kakirra) by no means excluded from the Aboriginal mythology and apparently of a more favorable disposition towards them, told the black men to cough and spit into their hands and then to offer that spit to the sun; if he accepts it, they may live still longer, if not, then he says: Be off and die. They have names for many constellations of the southern hemisphere, some of which are very peculiar, and Astrology, I am inclined to think, is closely connected with their mythology.

Strange and interesting is the tale of the ascension of the Munaina, beings that lived long before them. They threw spears (Kaya) in all directions of the sky, but they fell down to the ground; at last they threw one to the zenith right upwards, which fell not down but remained above, then they threw a second, which joined the former, sticking with its point in the soft butt end of the other, so a third and so forth, till the pillar reached to the ground and the Munaina climbed upwards.

When the natives are asked, whence they know all these things, they reply, that they do not know them, but that distant people say so or that their grandfathers, meaning their ancestors, told them so.

To get rid of an immense imaginary animal, called Tura, which swallows them, they make use of a variety of magic sentences, some of which are in my possession, but which I do not understand.

It is by no means easy to get such things from them, since they are considered as secrets, which the women and children must not know, and which are only communicated to the men, when they are tattooed. When I was told all this, it was under the express condition that I would not tell it to another black man. This proves, I think, that if I obtained no more, I at least enjoy their confidence, which is of great value and which I gained by nothing else than by knowing their language.

What I have here communicated to you, my dear Sir! will, I am sure, at once surprise and interest you, but also I feel persuaded convince you not only that the natives of South Australia have been much wronged and grossly misrepresented in Europe, but also that there is sufficient reason, at least as far as they are concerned, to hope and to pray and to work, that one day they may abandon their superstitions, sins and passions, and become our fellow christians, as they are now our fellow subjects, and become pious disciples and humble followers of Christ. For I must not conceal from you that for all I have said and could say in their favor, many of the horrid crimes of paganism are practised among them, not only superstitious murder, polygamy and sorcery, but also fornication and unnatural sins. That they exist, however, is not the worst, but that they are not stigmatised with that inward remorse and general disdain and horror, to which such crimes in christian countries are subject. The due reward of their sins of course follows them; loathsome diseases have been introduced, especially in Encounter Bay, but they suffered from them before Europeans were known to them, as also the native name for them proves. Of such a disease some have died, some have overcome it and some are still suffering from it, many besides the dysentery has sunk into the grave, and if it had not been for our assistance, still more would have gone into eternity.

A few days ago I witnessed the sad spectacle of two natives being executed, found guilty of the wilful murder of two European shepherds. The sensation of the colonists was great, but fortunately it has passed without further disastrous consequences.

Such things, I conceive, are so many voices calling for christian assistance. I have endeavoured conscientiously to fulfill my high duties and hope the power of Christ will enable me to do so for the future, but I wished I could do more, the sphere of our operation was not limited for want of means. I gratefully acknowledge the personal support we have received from the Government and the christian public; I with equal gratitude acknowledge the just and laudable arrangement to give the natives rations: but I think it not sufficient for the Government to make amends with them,

nor is it enough for us to sit in Adelaide when the natives leave the town as is at present the case, when not one is remaining. We ought to accompany them, but without a supply of provisions, without any conveyance, it is impracticable. The Government ought to give them land, (not on the Parkland however and in the immediate neighbourhood of the capital) and cattle, that they might learn agriculture, the natural transition from a wandering life of hunting and fishing, and the present Governor, I am sure, would do it, but — he is not authorised. What under such circumstances can and should be done, I leave to your wisdom.

One point is still left which I feel bound to mention and which, if not now any more important, is at least highly interesting. I mean the claim the Aborigines lay to the country formerly in their possession. In respect to that I can state the following: Every adult native possesses a district of land, which he calls his country and which he inherited from his father. When I asked them, whose their country was now, they replied the white men's, to whom they had given it; when I inquired further, what the white men had given them for it, they either said rice, biscuits and sugar or nothing. I need not add anything, persuaded that it is sufficient for you as a member of the Society for the Protection of the Aborigines, but will only say, that those wise men, who argue, that the natives have no more right to the soil than the Europeans, because they had not cultivated it, ought not to forget, that they could not, there being no horses, no cattle, no grains, no vegetables nor anything requisite for agriculture, etc.

Yesterday Mr Teichelmann and I waited upon His Excellency to return thanks for our houses; in the course of our conversation respecting the natives, he assured us that he would do all he could for their welfare, at the same time requesting us to send him a report of our inquiries and our views in regard to the Aborigines.

So much for this time. I have endeavoured to follow up your wishes, which you stated to us in London, when you desired us to send you now and then a report of our proceedings, and I hope that I have excluded such matters as would not interest you. In my next I mean to send you a specimen of the language. I must apologise for my imperfect language, I hope however, that you will understand it.

And now, my dear Sir! may the grace of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which unites us in him, remain and increase with you and

Your obedient Servant
C.W. Schurmann

P.S. The native words are spelled according to the german way which is exactly the same, Mr Threlkeld has adopted, except that my "J" must be pronounced as his "Y" at the beginning of a syllable.

C.W.S.