

THE BOARD AND ITS PEOPLE

A Feature Article

by

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Despite many opinions to the contrary—it is now being generally realised that both the States and Federal governments are now doing everything that is possible to help our aborigines to become good citizens.

Our aborigines in their wild tribal state are a wonderful people, and when you know their tribal organisation as I do, it makes you wonder what we mean by calling them a primitive people. If a conference of leading sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists were to meet, they could not organise a system of tribal laws, as wise as the so-called ignorant aborigines have

done for themselves. How did they do it? But civilise, detribalise and Christianise our tribal aborigines, and you create an impossible problem.

There are at present about 46,000 full-blood aborigines in Australia, and about 29,000 mixed bloods, a total of about 75,000. Nowhere in Australia today are there any aborigines who are not more or less in touch with and being helped by the various governments and their welfare officers.

There are in N.S.W. 11,560 persons of aborigine blood, of whom 953 are full-bloods.

The mixed bloods in this State have their own elected representative on the Aborigines Welfare Board, Mr. H. P. Grooves. The full-bloods also have the right to elect their own member to the board, but they never do, for they are not interested.

The Aborigine Welfare Board of N.S.W. last year spent about £183,000 on aborigine welfare. Since the war we have in N.S.W. spent about £500,000 on hundreds of houses that many white people would be pleased to live in, and now 90 per cent. of the persons of aborigine blood refuse to pay any rent. The rent is only nominal, about 17s. a week, and many of the aborigines as shearers and bush workers make big money. Every aborigine who works for an employer in N.S.W. works under exactly the same conditions as any white employee. Many aborigines are also members of unions. With the possible exception of the non-exempted full-bloods, every person of aborigine blood in N.S.W. is just as free as you or I. The non-exempted full-bloods are not entitled to the Federal Old Age pension, but in their old age they may go and live on the Welfare Board's nineteen reserves or stations, and be better looked after than if they handled their own money. There is nothing



now to prevent the humblest aborigine in N.S.W. from becoming a highly cultured person, if he or she will make the effort.

The Aborigines Welfare Board has a splendid Boys' Home at Kempsey, and a Girls' Home at Cootamundra, where the young persons of aborigine blood are trained to be useful, and are given every encouragement and opportunity to mix with white people, in the schools, sporting and churches. The Board will put any young aborigine through the University, but so far, not a single aborigine has been able to qualify. Aborigine children are just as bright as most white children up to the age of about thirteen or fourteen, but then arrested development sets in. They lack persistency, and they become just drifters.



When you see aborigines living on the bank of the creek under what may seem deplorable conditions to us, do not be perturbed. They may prefer to live that way. At no time are aborigines keen on houses. Albert Namatjira the artist makes at least £3,000 a year, and he and his wife and six children live around a typical small aborigine fire. I have visited Albert several times. On stations where the squatters have to provide the aborigines with huts, the aborigines store their belongings in the hut and camp outside, and if a death occurs they burn the hut down.

Drink and apathy are the two greatest enemies of the aborigines, and I offer it as my opinion that to allow aborigines easier access to drink is criminal madness.

I know that we have a stern social duty towards our aborigines. We must try to help them, but they do not understand or appreciate what we are trying to do for them. But, of course, they are no worse than many white people. We must also understand that the word aborigine can be most misleading, for many of the people that we call aborigines are nearly white.

I have great affection for the real old full-blood aborigine. I owe my life to their loyalty, but when we try to help the detribalised aborigines we undertake a heart-breaking task. All good Australians may rest assured that now everything is being done to help the aborigines to help themselves to become citizens.

