

IX.—Notes on Aborigines of the Northern Territory of South Australia. By W. Ramsay Smith, D.Sc., M.B., C.M., Permanent Head of the Health Department, South Australia. (*Communicated by Professor D. J. CUNNINGHAM, F.R.S.*)

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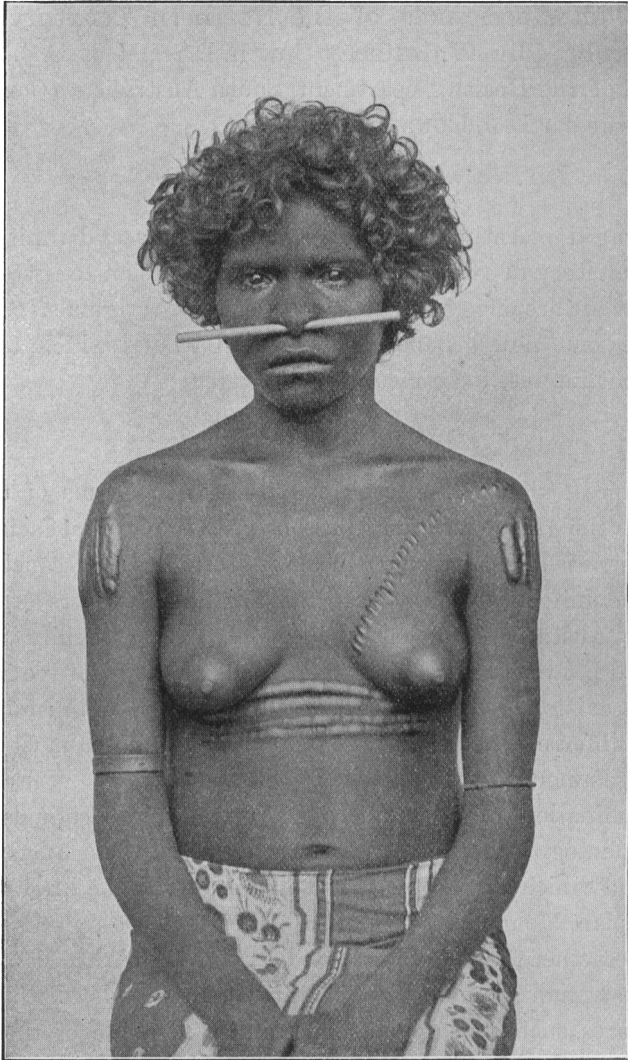
WHILST engaged recently in inquiring into diseases and sanitation in the Northern Territory of South Australia, I took occasion to investigate some points in the anthropology and ethnology of the aborigines. This investigation broke some new ground, and produced results which I consider to be of sufficient interest to be recorded.

PHYSIOGNOMY.

What impresses an observer on examining aborigines of undoubtedly pure breed is the great variation to be observed in external facial character. This impression is all the stronger if one is familiar with Keane's statements regarding the uniformity in physical and mental characters of the inhabitants of the Australian continent, "in which a strong family likeness is at once detected between all the scattered groups of its primitive inhabitants." While there exists, no doubt, a large substratum of uniformity, too much must not be inferred from a casual examination; and one must be prepared to find a large amount of well-marked variation.

The examination of a number of Australian aborigines, or even a number of photographs of aborigines, will show that Australian heads will be found which show a facial resemblance to all the known recognised types, Ethiopian, Mongolian, Caucasian, American. It appears to me that in this respect there is some analogy between the Australian aborigines and the Australian fauna. The primitive marsupials, distinguished by certain features, such as epipubic bones, inflected angle of the lower jaw, "aplacentation," double uterus, etc., having been cut off at an early period from competition with nearly all other classes of mammals, have developed along lines similar to those along which other forms have specialised, and now mimic other classes of animals, *e.g.*, carnivora, insectivora, rodents, etc. The Australian aborigines have to some small degree undergone similar development, and now mimic in facial expression the four primary groups of Hominidæ as well as many intermediate forms. I speak generally, not in strictly scientific language nor in detail. Further, I would emphasise the

fact that no explanation is proffered as to how this evolution has occurred in either case. When Professor Klaatsch of Heidelberg was in Adelaide about



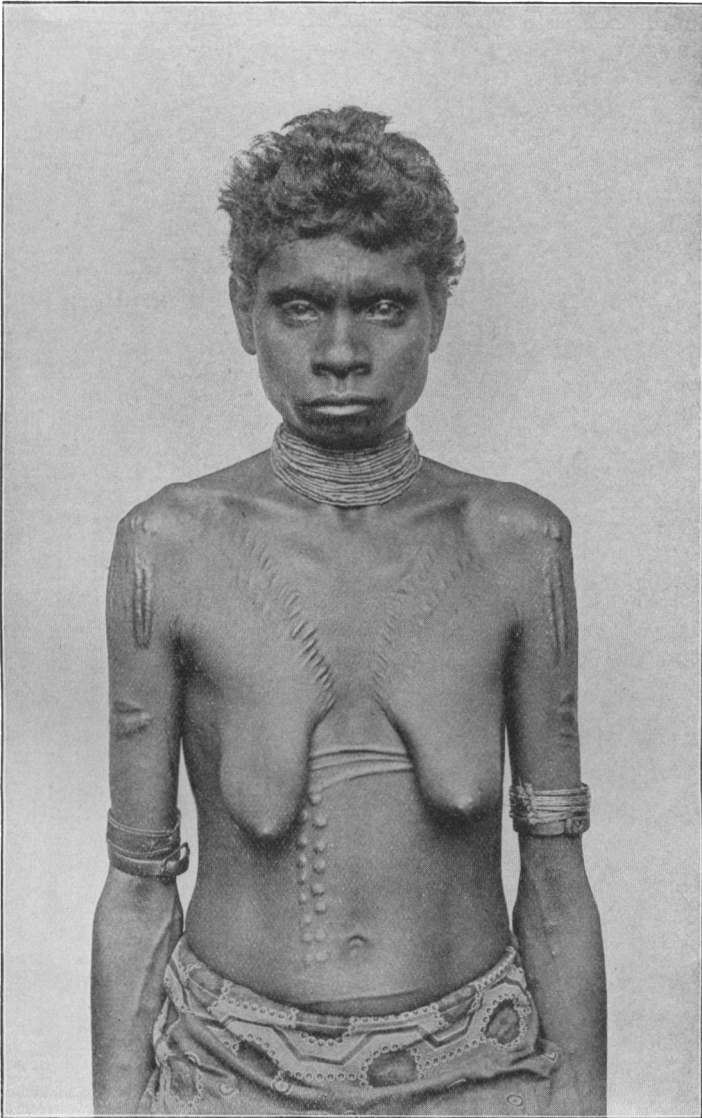
Alligator Tribe. (Photograph by Mr Foelsche.)

a year ago, Dr Rogers showed him a large number of photographs illustrating these variations of type, and presented him with some illustrative examples.

#### BODY MARKINGS.

Towards the end of 1903 an English gentleman, Captain Hayes, wrote to me regarding "recognition marks," which, he said, "our Society people

and costermongers have 'galore' and which the Hindoos of the Madras Presidency sport in the form of painted lines on their foreheads, so that



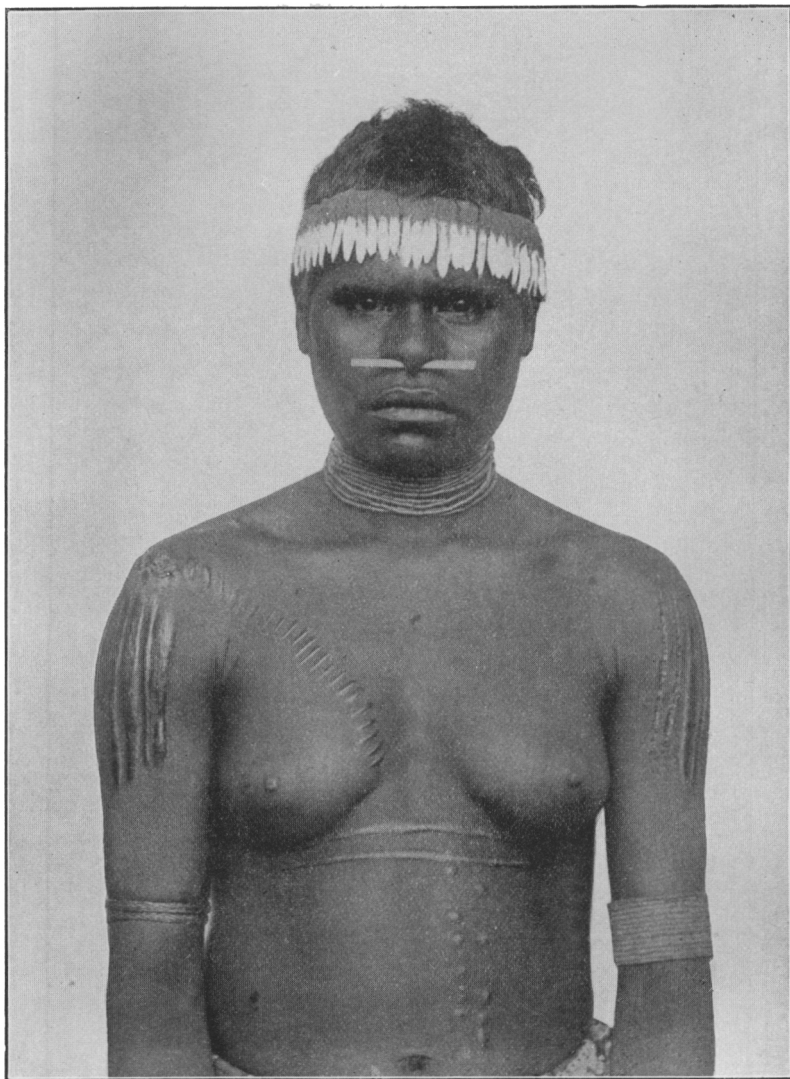
Alligator Tribe. (Photograph by Mr Foelsche.)

they can recognise the respective members of their own castes." He asked me if the Australian blacks had any recognition marks.

In connection with this subject of recognition markings I made many inquiries in various parts of the State, but I could obtain no satisfactory

information regarding it; nor could I find any key to the meaning of the scars on the bodies of aboriginals.

One day when talking with an old lubra and her daughter near Port



Alligator Tribe. (Photograph by Mr Foelsche.)

Darwin, I gathered that there was some connection between the marks across the upper part of the abdomen and the number of children they had borne—four and one respectively. I tested this information on other blacks and found confirmation of it. Mr Foelsche, who is one of the best informed and most exact of all observers of aboriginals, told me that he

knew that certain markings on a woman's back betokened widowhood; and when he showed me his magnificent set of photographs, on which he had spent many years of work, and said I might select what I pleased, I chose about a score of specimens illustrating markings on women. These accompany this paper. A few days afterwards an old blackfellow, "Ned,"



Larrakeyah Tribe. (Photograph by Mr Foelsche.)

called and brought me a message; and while talking with him I dropped the collection of photographs on the ground, and he helped to pick them up. He could not conceal his great interest in the pictures showing the women with all their charms as he had known them in his young days; and I rewarded him by exhibiting the photographs one after another, and he read off for me the significance of the marks, after this fashion: "Three fella picanniny, one fella boy, two fella girl: four fella picanniny, two fella boy

die, one fella girl die." On asking him the meaning of a line of short incisions from the shoulder inwards and downwards towards the lower end of the breast bone, he said, "Sister die." When we came to the widow's photograph, he shook his head and looked sorrowful. I said, "Where her blackfella sit down?" He said, "She no got blackfella." I said, "She no got Benjamin?" and he replied, "No more Benjamin."

In January, 1901, I sent a collection of photographs of aboriginals to Sir William Turner, which he considered to be of considerable interest. He said he had not previously seen a series to illustrate the raised scars, and added that it was interesting to see that the custom is not restricted to the male sex. There is no doubt that little is known regarding the significance of scarring.

Have the markings in men a similar significance? I cannot say: I had not sufficient opportunity of investigating this aspect of the question. I found, however, that in some tribes the first marks are made on the shoulders and thighs, and the last across the body at the level of the sternum. I was told the Larrakeyahs do not cut on the chest; that the Victorias do, and also the Borroloolooas. I asked, "What for cut?" and was told, "Suppose it looks pretty: don't know." There is something in the "pretty" theory: I have noticed boys of from six to ten years old painted with the first markings. In some tribes, if a man dies, some blackfellow cuts the wife and the brother of the deceased (the latter across the abdomen and shoulder), and the brother cannot marry that lubra.

As regards the scars made, these are pathological curiosities, since many of the most outstanding are deeply pigmented. It is often stated that earth is rubbed into the fresh cuts, and that they are kept open from time to time by this process or by other means. I found no confirmation of this; on the contrary, I was informed that nothing is rubbed in, but that the incisions are covered with a leaf to keep away flies.

One cannot reason from analogy that similar markings in men and women have similar meanings. Even among white people, a ring may mean marriage or engagement in a woman, and in a man vanity or rheumatism.

#### DENTITION.

Some years ago, Sir William Turner, when examining an aboriginal skull from South Australia, noticed that the incisor teeth were in contact by their cutting edges when the condyles of the lower jaw were articulated, and placed in contact with the ridge that bounds the back of the glenoid fossa, and the teeth clenched. He had also noticed this in a Malay, a Bushman,

and an Eskimo.\* Sir John Lubbock had observed the same thing in prehistoric Danish skulls, indicating, as he said, a peculiar manner of eating. In his recent work, in which the Australian skulls in the Anthropological Museum at Cambridge are described, Duckworth discusses this question, like all other writers, from the point of view of dried skulls, and finds the evidence somewhat conflicting.

It does not seem to have struck any observer to make an examination, or a series of examinations, of the living subject, although one would have thought this essential to the proper investigation of the subject. Having read the latest contributions on this matter while in the territory, I made a point of examining a large number of aborigines of various tribes and a number and variety of half-castes. The following is the result:—

In many tribes I examined, I found that nearly all the natives bite “flush.” A few, however, overlap with the upper jaw, and a few with the lower—a native of Port Keats had the lower slightly overlapping. A native of Borrooloola had the upper overlapping, but he was said to have a mixture of Macassar blood. A woman from Brock’s Creek had the upper very much overlapping, but the lower was so small as to appear to be deformed. I examined three Port Essington “boys.” The first had a European father and an aboriginal mother; the second a West Indian father and an aboriginal mother; the third a European father and an aboriginal mother. All three “bite flush.” There is said to be a good deal of Malay blood among the natives there as elsewhere on the coast.

A half-caste woman whom I examined bit flush, and her child by a half-caste father also bit flush. I found a father (Larrakeyah tribe) with projecting upper jaw, while his son had the incisors flush.

The occurrence of supernumerary teeth calls for some remarks. Duckworth, in his work on *Morphology and Anthropology* (1904), says: “Completely-formed accessory molar teeth are not common in the Hominidæ, although the palate and alveolar arcade in many crania of the aborigines of Australia seem to be spacious enough to accommodate them. It is, however, in the cranium of such an aboriginal native that Sir William Turner records the occurrence of no less than three accessory molar teeth, and such anomalies are more frequent in the Melanesian and Australian aborigines than in other Hominidæ.”

The skull referred to, which was described by Sir William Turner in the *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology*, vol. xxxiv., was a skull from Morambro Station in this State, which I was fortunate to obtain and to present to the Edinburgh University Museum. The other day, on looking

\* *Journal of Anat. and Phys.*, vol. xxv. p. 461, 1891.

over Dr Rogers's collection, I saw a broken skull of an aboriginal which he was good enough to give me. It was found by him about eight miles from Adelaide. It shows an extra molar on the left side which, though of full size, has not erupted. On the right side, about the level of the third molar, there is a supernumerary molar of diminished size, possessing four cusps, and projecting through the facial surface of the superior maxilla.

These are not the only abnormalities of aboriginal dentition that I have lately observed. Several skulls show very marked examples of more or less complete division of the root of the first bicuspid tooth; and one skull from the Northern Territory shows that this tooth on the left side had a complete inner or lingual root and a grooved outer or labial root, while the right one had two separate roots. The general fact to be noted is that subdivision of the roots of the bicuspids is almost invariably more marked in the first tooth than in the second; but books on anatomy, with a very few exceptions, state the contrary.

In connection with this subject of dentition among the lower races, I may refer to a skull which I recently received from New Caledonia. In the upper jaw the "bicuspids" have the characters of permanent molars as regards size, roots, and wearing of the enamel. They show, however, the bulging above the neck which is characteristic of milk molars; and their true temporary nature is proved by finding the permanent molars exposed on trephining the jaw in the region above them. In the lower jaw the first bicuspids are normal; the second have the characters of permanent molars as in the upper jaw, but their true temporary nature is also determined by the discovery of the imprisoned permanent molars after trephining. From extensive inquiries made I believe the conditions exhibited by this skull are altogether unique. I hope that Professor Cunningham will be able to describe these and other specimens in greater detail by and by.

Speaking of teeth leads naturally to some observations on the mouth. Professor Cunningham, when writing to me about a specimen I had sent from Professor Watson, said, "I notice in the tongue that patches of the mucous membrane are deeply pigmented in the lymphoid region. Is this common among natives?" This question of pigmentation also arises in connection with malaria. Lofton has described black patches in the tongue which he considers to be diagnostic of malaria. I took an opportunity of examining several blacks, and found that pigmentation of the tongue and mouth is not uncommon. One good-looking girl, "Rosie," the belle and the flirt of the tribe, showed large black patches on each side of the tongue,



their long axis being transverse to the margin; and she had numerous large black spots inside the lips and cheek.

A male aboriginal from Brock's Creek presented a pigmented appearance of the gums near the incisor teeth. This was found to be due to varicose veins; and a very peculiar appearance of the nose was found to be due to the same cause.

#### SUBINCISION.

Circumcision is practised by some tribes but not by others though living in close proximity. The mode of circumcision and the details associated with it differ in the various tribes that practise the rite. Among the Port Keats natives, the king performs the ceremony; the prepuce is nicked all round and removed. It is then put into a shell, which is closed up by gum, and this is hung alongside the penis until the wound is healed.

For several years I had been puzzled regarding some points connected with the operation of subincision. About eight years ago I saw an Adelaide specimen subincised to the extent of an inch. This I sent to Sir William Turner. Recently Professor Watson gave me another specimen, from Central Australia, which I presented to the Anthropological Museum of Edinburgh University in his name. Both of these, so far as appearances go, might have been specimens of natural partial hypospadias. I saw, however, in a deeply scarred man from Borroloola in the Northern Territory, a partial incision which terminated posteriorly to the right of the urethra, and presented an appearance quite different from that of a natural hypospadias. An old blackfellow gave me the explanation of this, so far as that tribe was concerned. The first operation performed on a young man is circumcision. A year or so after, a partial subincision is made; and the next year the subincision is made complete.

#### MUTILATION OF THE FINGER.

The custom of mutilating the finger of girls in some tribes is well known. I have never seen reference to any but the index finger of the right hand. When speaking with Mr Foelsche on this matter, I remarked that I had seen the left finger mutilated. He could not recollect ever having seen or heard of this, and thought I must be mistaken or that the occurrence was accidental. In order to make sure I retraced my steps, and in a short time found three instances, which I photographed. An old native called William gave me some information about this peculiarity. He said that when the cutting is done at once, it is the right hand finger that is cut; but when

one week or more is allowed to pass, then they cut the left. Cutting in the young is done by means of a mussel shell. In the grown up, amputation is performed by means of a spider's web ligature. This is put round the finger and tightened at intervals so as to eat into the joint, which it does in the course of five or six days. After a time the piece of the finger drops off. If it does not drop off, the finger sometimes remains bent.

I had been informed by whites that the finger was bent strongly and the ligature applied to it in that position, and that ulceration began in the skin over the projecting part; but I could obtain no confirmation of this from the blacks. I have also heard it stated that the mutilation is inflicted only at marriage. Of this I found no confirmation from the aboriginals whom I questioned.

At Brock's Creek I saw a black youth who had lost the terminal phalanx of his right forefinger, and who had a deep constriction on the middle phalanx. On inquiry I found that this was due to the lad having put on an iron ring so tightly that he could not get it off, and the result was as stated.

#### THE FOOT OF THE ABORIGINAL.

In 1893 I had occasion to make a series of investigations into the structure and functions of the lower extremity of the human subject. The results I embodied in a thesis which was not published at that time. Some statements in it were suggested by certain strictures made by Mr Ellis of Gloucester upon artistic work, or, as he would probably have preferred to term it, artists' work.

In dealing with the action of the toes I remarked that the use of the great toe is taken advantage of in many actions, involving special muscular effort or special dexterity in maintaining equilibrium, or in certain actions of the foot that have a resemblance to grasping. This is often illustrated in art, as in Leighton's "Athlete struggling with a Python," and Myron's "Discobolus." The same thing is noticed in literature: "He sat with his foot bent down, and the nails set into the ground to give him foothold, even as a bird turns its claws inwards as it sits on a branch" (S. R. Crockett: *Mad Sir Uchtered of the Hills*, chap. ix.). I went on to say: "In making these statements I am fully aware of Ellis's criticism that such positions, if not 'impossible,' are 'unnatural' and 'bad art.' But such criticism is the outcome of a particular way of looking at the study of function. Some writers, studying the structure of the foot, cannot free themselves quite from the trammels of long habit, and yield to the temptation to deduce function from structure instead of from action. So confident

are they of the correctness of their method and the truth of their results that they do not hesitate to lay down the law regarding what careful observers ought to see. Artists, who follow the established yet ever re-tested representations of the human body as it appears at rest or in action, are taken to task for representing the unnatural and impossible, and are excused by those writers only on the ground that they have formed bad ideals and employed bad models. I confess I have more faith in the results of a few thousand years of careful observation by artists of what *is* than in any deduction of what *ought to be*."

On my recent journeyings amongst the Filipinos, my attention was directed to the dexterity of some of the native races with their feet. Afterwards when examining the blacks in the Northern Territory I was struck with the great width of the fore part of the foot in many natives, the looseness of the great toe, and the power of grasping which was exhibited. Most natives are as ready with a foot as with a hand. A man or woman when talking will drop a pipe; immediately the toes close on it, and with a quick movement it is passed up behind the other leg into the hand which is hanging down at the outside of the opposite thigh.

No more complete refutation of Ellis's views could well be afforded than by this condition of the Northern Territory blackfellow's foot, which shows only a difference in degree in a structure that is present, and of action that is possible, in the foot of the white subject.

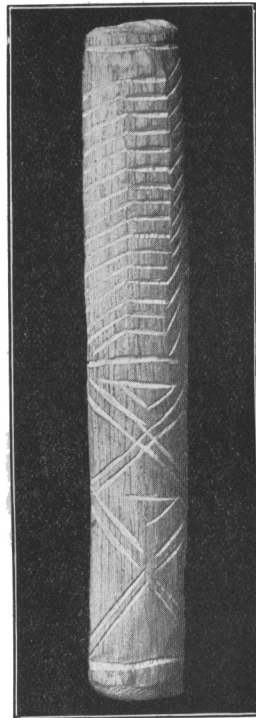
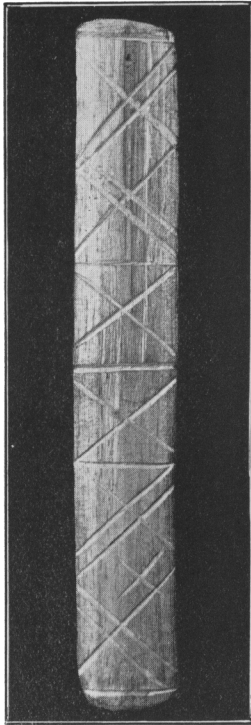
Since my return, and since lecturing on the subject to the Field Naturalists' Society at the University here, I see a report that Professor Klaatsch has been studying in detail what he regards as an extreme instance in an aboriginal among the prisoners from Port Keats in the gaol at Port Darwin whom I had examined and photographed.

Too much stress must not be laid on the occurrence of a single case of this sort when discussing the affinities of the Hominidæ; but should large numbers or whole tribes be found similarly constituted, then the case is different.

#### WRITING.

In the Palmerston Hospital during my visit there was a black boy, named Spider, suffering from "ulcerating granuloma pudendi." One day the nurse found him carving a small piece of wood, and asked him what he was doing. He said he was writing a letter to send to his father. She asked what he had said, and he replied that he had written that he was sorry to say he was no better. She told him she thought he was somewhat better; so he took another stick and began to carve a message that "Missie"

thought he was a little better. The nurse was good enough to procure the first letter for me (see accompanying figures). One day I happened to be talking with a very intelligent blackfellow, and I asked him, "You savee writing?" He said, "Yes: me savee writing." I handed him the stick and said, "You savee this one writing?" He took it in his hand, looked at it carefully on both sides, seemed disappointed, and said at length, "Me no savee Borrooloola writing." He was right. I found that Spider, the writer of the letter, was a Borrooloola boy. I then asked him about the kind of



Message-stick—Aboriginal "Yabber-stick," flat side. "Yabber-stick," rounded side.

writing to be found in his tribe; and he told me the only sort they recognised was a message to the effect to come along because there was to be a big fight. He said this communication consisted of a small piece of bamboo with a thread tied round and then passed through it. There would appear to be considerable differences, even among very nearly adjacent tribes, in literary advancement, so far as writing is concerned.

Was this letter from Spider, like some of the smoke signals the aboriginals use, merely a preconcerted sign, or can some of these tribes arrange and combine elementary characters or signs so as to convey complex messages?

## "SINGING DEAD."

The custom of pointing the death-bone is well known. The thing pointed is not always a bone: in some places a piece of wood is used. In parts of the Territory, if the victim does not die within a reasonable time, his tribe fellows gather together, sit round him, and "sing him dead." This peculiar custom seems to be little known.

What strikes one forcibly when moving among these blacks is their restlessness. They shift camp on the least provocation, or for no cause that one can discern. When you ask where a certain blackfellow is, you are told, "Him wuk alonga Mr So-and-so's." You don't know whether the word is "walk" or "work," but it amounts to pretty much the same thing. The blacks will work for a day, a week, a month, so steadily that you think they have become domesticated, or at least domiciled; then one day they are missing, and nothing will induce them to return, unless they are allowed to take a "spell" of rest or wandering when the symptoms of restlessness begin to manifest themselves. This restlessness is characteristic of all Australian blacks, and stands out in strong contrast to most South Sea Islanders, who are examples of extreme stayers at home. This is probably the one universal character among Australian aborigines. As regards local characters and customs, the student cannot be too careful. Anthropology has suffered much from assuming that what is true of one tribe is true of another, especially if it has lived in close proximity. It is a safe rule in dealing with aborigines never to reason from analogy, but to write down every fact, with the informant's name and the exact locality or tribe to which it refers, and then to verify and reverify it. One will generally be right in affirming and wrong in denying.

The blackfellow is difficult to understand. You think you know him, but you don't. You believe you have got the better of a blackfellow when you have forced him to work and hear him going about it, singing in his native tongue. But the song is composed of all the curse-words he knows, and a history, accurate or hypothetical, but in any case not creditable, of you and your ancestors. The more we know of the blackfellow the more we are convinced that there are whole subterranean rivers of anthropology unmapped and untapped.