

ABORIGINES OF WEST AUSTRALIA

SHOCKING DISCLOSURES

At various times during recent years the Right Rev. Dr. Gibney, Bishop of Perth, and others have drawn attention to the shocking manner in which the aborigines of Western Australia were treated both by many of the white settlers and the police authorities. Public opinion at last became aroused, and the Government was forced to appoint a Commissioner to inquire into the administration of the Aborigines Department, and the employment and treatment of aborigines and half-castes. Dr. Roth, the Commissioner, owing to the limited time at his disposal, had not been able to make his inquiries as complete as he would wish, but sufficient evidence had been placed before him to show that the natives are shockingly treated by the police authorities, and unscrupulous Europeans. The arrest of natives and their subsequent treatment on charges of cattle-killing (says the Commissioner) may be detailed as follows—

When starting out on such an expedition the constable takes a variable amount of provisions, private and Government horses, and a certain number of chains. Both he and his black-trackers, as many as five of them, are armed with Winchester rifles. A warrant is taken out in the first place, if information is laid against certain aborigines, but when the police go out on patrol, and the offence is reported, the offenders are tracked and arrested without warrant. Very often there is no proper information laid, in that it is verbal; when already out on patrol, there may be no information at all. Blacks may be arrested without instructions, authority, or information received from the pastoralist whose cattle are alleged to have been killed; the pastoralist may even object to such measures having been taken.

Neck Chains.

Not knowing beforehand how many blacks he is going to arrest, the policeman only takes chains sufficient for about fifteen natives; if a large number are reported guilty, he will take chains to hold about twenty-five to thirty. Chains in the northern, not in the southern, portion of this State are fixed to the necks instead of to the wrists of native prisoners.

Children of from fourteen to sixteen years of age are neck-chained. There are no regulations as to the size, weight, mode of attachment, or length of chain connecting the necks of any two prisoners. When the prisoner is alone, the chain is attached to his neck and hands, and wound round his body; the weight prevents him running away so easily. According to the evidence of the Commissioner of Police, when there is more than one aboriginal concerned, the attachment of the chain would be to the saddle of the mounted police officer, but only when absolutely necessary; such an accident as a native neck-chained to a holling horse has not yet happened to his knowledge. The mode of attachment of the chain around the neck is effected with handcuffs and split links, the latter bought privately, i.e., at the expense of the arresting constable from a firm in Perth, and doubtfully with the knowledge of the Police Commissioner. The grave dangers attendant on the use of these iron split-links, and the difficulty of opening them in case of urgency or accident are pointed out. The fact of the connecting chain being too short is also dangerous, because if a prisoner fell, he would be bound to drag down the prisoner on either side of him; yet the Wyndham gaoler has noticed the length of the chain joining two natives' necks to be 21in. the cruelty of which he remarked upon to the escorting police. As far as one witness can find out from the police and natives the chains are never taken off when crossing rivers and creeks. In addition to the neck-chains the prisoner may be further secured with cuffs on his wrists (as your Commissioner has seen in the photographs of constables escorting chain-gangs), or on his ankles. Apparently unknown to the Commissioner of police, chains are used for female natives, not only at night, but sometimes during the day. These women are the unwilling witnesses arrested illegally for the Crown.

Police Profits.

The larger the number of prisoners and witnesses, the better pecuniarily for the police, who received from 1s 6½d to 2s 5d daily per head, or, as it is called in the north-western vernacular 'per knob.' Examples of the total amounts which certain of these constables, etc., have individually received are as follows:—J. A. Caldwell, £259 6s 9d. since January, 1904; J. Wilson, £162 2s 7d between March, 1902, and October, 1903, and July, 1904; J. Inglis, £29 17s 1d

in October, 1902, and £165 16s between April, 1903, and May, 1904; F. W. Richardson, £121 7s 8d between October and December, 1903; J. C. Thompson, £300 19s 1d between March, 1901, and May, 1904, with £33 9s 5d since then; W. Goodridge, £138 10s 8d since April, 1903; J. O'Brien, £138 5s 9d between November, 1901, and August, 1902; A. H. Buckland, £215 12s 6d since March, 1903; M. Mulkerin, £335 6s since November, 1901; J. P. Sullivan, £230 11s up to September, 1904. One of these recipients alleges that such moneys are paid into the mess fund at the station, so that the profits are indirectly shared by other police officers.

The number of aborigines brought in being the great desideratum, each having a money value to the escorting officer, it is not surprising to find that little boys of immature age have been brought in to give evidence, that children, varying in age between ten and sixteen, are charged with killing cattle, that blacks do not realise what they are sentenced for, that an old and feeble native arrives at the end of his journey in a state of collapse and dies eighteen days after admission into gaol. It is only fair to state with regard to the cattle-killing children just referred to, some of whom were found neck-chained in the Roebourne Gaol, that, as soon as the attention of the Executive was drawn to them by your Commissioner they were released. Besides being half-starved blacks are 'hammered' on the way down. Any detentions on the journey in with the prisoners, or out with the witnesses, are also encouraged by this system of capitulation fees.

At present there is nothing to prevent the constable arresting as many blacks as he chooses, while there is no limit to the number of witnesses he is allowed to bring in with him. With a view to avowedly justifying their action in bringing these large batches of prisoners into court—as many as ten or fourteen at a time—the police necessarily take care to make absolutely sure of a conviction.

To Secure a Conviction

the accused are accordingly made to plead guilty—at the muzzle of the rifle, if need be. At this your Commissioner is not at all surprised, considering his firm conviction in the truth of a statement made him by a native lately released from gaol, where he had served a sentence for cattle-killing, to the effect one of the batch of prisoners originally arrested with him was shot by the escorting constable in the forehead, the victim in question being very sick at the time. Owing to the informant's lack of proper pronunciation, your Commissioner unfortunately cannot absolutely identify the murderer's name, though he has reported the matter to the proper authorities. With regard to the young women witnesses, their prostitution by the escorting police, the trackers, and stockmen, etc., who have aided in hunting them down, has already been referred to, partly for this reason and partly to gain their acquiescence in the subsequent court proceedings, their treatment on the way down, as compared with the men, is tempered with, perhaps, a little more mercy in the way of tucker and comparative freedom. Though these women are allegedly as guilty as the men, one constable states that he is acting under instructions in not arresting them; on the other hand they are chained or otherwise prevented getting away; they are practically asked to turn informers; they

Are Never Cautioned

in the proper sense of the term when giving evidence against their husbands and thus do not, in the slightest degree, realise the harm they may be doing. The excuse made for bringing in these women at all is that the constable can get no other native evidence, or that 'the grown-up men are those that kill the bullock; there are no young boys in the tribes, the squatters have them all.' The accused male prisoners still less understand their position. On their arrest, which may be before any evidence detrimental to them had been received, they are asked (apparently without being cautioned) whether they have killed a beast; they do not, at the time, thoroughly understand what the charge is, but might a few hours later, evidently after the gins' evidence had been suborned. The police tracker is the medium of communication, occasionally has to converse through a second interpreter, and camps with prisoners and witnesses before the case is brought into court. No witnesses are ever brought in for the defence. Furthermore, the pastoralist or station manager does not prosecute; he is generally very busy; it is a matter of domestic economy—he would be only too pleased to prosecute if he could do so with a minimum of personal inconvenience. It is quite intelligible that such an individual's personal convenience should be thus respected; the liability of the accused to a sentence of three years'