

1874.
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WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

L E T T E R

FROM

HIS LORDSHIP THE BISHOP OF PERTH

CONCERNING

A Paragraph in the Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council
upon Departmental Expenditure, relating to

THE SUPPORT OF ABORIGINAL NATIVE CHILDREN

IN THE

ESTABLISHMENT UNDER HIS LORDSHIP'S SUPERVISION.

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*Presented to the Legislative Council by His Excellency's Command.*  
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P E R T H :
BY AUTHORITY: RICHARD PETHER, GOVERNMENT PRINTER.

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1874.

No. 2.

His Lordship The Bishop of Perth to The Honorable The Colonial Secretary.

SIR,

Perth, August 23, 1873.

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of a printed copy of the Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council appointed to consider and report upon Departmental Expenditure; and also of a letter from yourself of the 18th instant, in which you refer me to the last paragraph of the said Report: which is as follows:—

“Eighth, Aborigines.—Your Committee are of opinion that the money voted for “supporting a number of native children in an establishment under the supervision of the “Bishop of Perth might be more judiciously expended.”

If it were at all in accordance with my inclination to stand in such a matter upon mere formal or official niceties, my answer to this would be that the paragraph to which I am referred does not afford me an opportunity of remarking upon it; for the simple reason that it conveys to my mind no knowledge whatever of its meaning. It leaves me quite in ignorance whether it means that the members of the Committee are of opinion that the money would be more judiciously expended if it were taken away altogether from the Aborigines Department and handed over to some other Department, or if it were expended in supplying food and blankets to adult natives instead of supporting children, or if it were expended in supporting children in a way differing from that in which they are now supported.

I cannot possibly know how I am to understand the paragraph. I cannot ask the Committee, because the Committee has terminated its sittings and cannot be reassembled. And, as to asking any individual member of the Committee, I do not see how I could accept an interpretation from any individual. The paragraph has, I presume, been purposely and intentionally put forth by the Committee collectively in its present shape. Some members may have meant one thing by it, other members may have meant another thing—and, in that case, no individual could give me a full and adequate interpretation of what was meant by the Committee at large.

As the matter stands, however, there are two courses open to me. I must either decline to make any remark upon the paragraph upon the grounds above stated; or I must endeavour to deal, in succession, with its different probable meanings.

I adopt the last named course.

First, then, I suppose the paragraph to mean that the money would be more judiciously expended if it were not applied to the purposes of native education at all; but expended in some different way. My remarks in this case must be as follows: I have, upon many occasions, and frequently in the most open and public manner, expressed my opinion that the inhabitants of this Colony, unless they renounce their profession of Christianity, and, in so doing, cease to call themselves a Christian people, are bound, by the most solemn obligations of their religion, to endeavour to make the Aborigines of this country participators with themselves in the blessings and privileges of the Gospel of Christ.

There are, at this present time, very many aboriginal children to be seen in all parts of the Colony who (I speak advisedly) are as capable of being instructed and brought up in the Christian faith as the children of our own families. More than this, children and young persons of mixed blood, many of them more than half Europeans, are to be seen frequently throughout the Country, utterly neglected and abandoned to their fate; with no future before them but that of ignorance and vice, and depravity of the most revolting character. Their condition seems to send up a loud cry to heaven “refuge fails us; no man careth for our souls.”

I affirm again, as I have often affirmed, as a Minister and Messenger of God, that the existing neglect of these persons is a heinous sin in God's sight, and a foul blot upon our good name as a Christian people.

The maintenance of the little School, formerly under the care of Mr. and Mrs. Camfield and now under my care, has never been regarded by me as an adequate attempt on the part of the Country to discharge its duty to God in the matter of these people. But I have always regarded the School with the deepest interest as, at least, an acknowledgment on the part of the country of its duty to God, and as an expression, however faint, of its willingness to do at least something in discharge of that duty. So strongly have I felt upon this subject that, when upon the occasion of the late Mr. Camfield's illness, there seemed reason to fear that the School might fall to the ground, I signified my wish to retire from my present position in order to take charge of it. Its existence, as I have already said, I looked upon as an acknowledgment of a great duty. The abandonment I should have regarded in the light of a public repudiation of that duty. And I was prepared to do any thing and to make any sacrifice rather than that this Colony, so long as I continue to be identified with it, should be guilty of so grievous a sin. In the same light do I regard the matter now. And I implore the members of the Legislative Council not to entertain for a moment the idea of drawing back from this attempt, feeble though it be, to discharge a great duty to God.

I will next suppose the paragraph to mean that the money should still be expended in supporting native and half-caste children: but that such children should be supported in an Institution of a different kind from the existing one—viz., an Institution which might be called a feeding and working Station: in which no considerable portion of time would be given to the development of the children's mental faculties; and still less to their religious instruction: where no superior person, properly qualified for such duties, would be permanently employed for the purpose of instilling into the children's minds the truth of Christianity, whose duty it would be to assemble them daily for the hearing of God's Word and for prayer, and who would be charged, generally, with the formation of their moral and religious character. To place children in an Institution of this kind, destitute of all the main features of a Christian family, would not be, in any sense whatever, to discharge the duty of endeavouring to make christians of them. Such a bringing up would afford them no protection whatever against the temptations to vice and depravity, which, in after life, would beset them on every side.

I now come to the supposition that the paragraph does not mean that the children should be supported in an Institution differing, in its main features, from the present School: but that the Committee discover a want of judgment in the management of the present School. In this case, however, I am left altogether in the dark as to the supposed proofs of such want of judgment, and as to the manner in which that want of judgment shows itself. To meet the charge implied is therefore impossible. All I can say is this: The duty which I intended to discharge towards the Government when I took the children under my care I have discharged. I intended that the children should be trained in the habits of civilized life; that they should be made cleanly and industrious; should receive a suitable and useful education; and, above all, that they should be taught the great truths of Christianity; and should be brought up in the love and fear of God.

The School, when it was first established, by the joint action of the Government, Mr. and Mrs. Camfield, and Archdeacon Wollaston, was intended to be such a School as I have described. The same intention, to the best of my knowledge and belief, has been adhered to from that day to this. I have never been informed of any change of purpose with reference to the School. And if it be intended to fulfil the same purposes as in time past; and if it be now judged by those tests which are usually applied to such schools, I am justified in repeating the assertion—I have discharged the duty I undertook to discharge.

The Committee may have thought, or some of the members of it may have thought, that the children ought to be more extensively employed as cultivators of the soil. But any one

who will take the trouble to inspect these children one by one, and thus to judge for himself of their apparent age and strength, must be satisfied that the ways in which they are employed are more suitable to them than the tillage of the earth. The particular kind of work which mere children are put to is not of primary importance; provided they be made to do work of some kind, according to their strength and ability. These children necessarily have a full allowance of time for play and recreation. But that they also work is made evident by the following facts:—There are 18 children in the Institution, superintended by two females. This establishment does all its own washing, cooking, tailoring, making up dresses and linen clothing, house-cleaning, drawing and carrying water, cutting and carrying wood, emptying cess-pools, removing night-soil, &c., and is thus, except in some very few particulars, independent of all extraneous help. Moreover, two of the elder boys, sometimes one and sometimes the other, are frequently upon my premises. They see, and take part in, the ordinary operations of the garden, and they learn the general management of the stable, including saddling and harnessing horses, &c. If any one will favour me with the particulars of any Institution of a kindred nature, with children of similar size and strength, and a similar amount of superintendence, which does more for itself than this one, I shall be only too thankful to study such particulars, and to profit by any lesson which I may be able to learn therefrom.

If I had been in Perth at the time the Select Committee was sitting, some of the members would no doubt have communicated with me; and would have put to me some questions about the school. I find that some questions were put to the matron, and one point was mentioned which I wish now particularly to refer to.

The Matron was asked why some, who, as children, had been inmates of this Institution, had been removed to become inmates of another Institution not in this Colony? This is the reason:—Natives, as human beings like ourselves, require companionship. It is contrary to their nature, as it is contrary to our nature, to live without companions. *We* must have companions; and those companions must, to a certain extent, be like-minded with ourselves: they must be persons whose sentiments and feelings and thoughts and desires are, in some degree at least, in unison with our own. The same is the case with Natives. And Natives, who, in this Colony, go forth, as civilized and christianized persons, to make their way for themselves, cannot find such companionship. They may find, here and there, a person better disposed than the rest who will be kind to them and who will act fairly and honestly towards them in his engagements and dealings. But they will not find *companions*; and, if they could find *some* who would be real companions to them, even then they would be sure to come in contact, almost daily, with persons of a different mind, who, by their demeanour and mode of address, would make them feel that they were despised and looked down upon. They would be made to understand that they were regarded as persons never to be treated as equals. They might think themselves happy if they passed many days without meeting with persons who would scoff at their Bible reading and would ridicule the idea of their living holy and godly lives. Sir George Grey relates the following incident, and I make no apology for introducing it here, because he so clearly points the lesson which that incident should teach us, as regards the treatment of Natives. Between thirty and forty years have passed by since that incident occurred; very many cases similar to this have happened since then, all teaching the same lesson, and yet that lesson is still unlearned. The lesson is that no amount of kindness on the part of Europeans towards natives, however well-intended, can make up to those persons for the absence of *companionship*. Companionship man *must have*: and, if he cannot have it one way, an irresistible impulse urges him to seek it in another way. This is Sir George Grey's story, with the moral (Vol. II, p. 370):—

“The officers of the ‘Beagle’ took away with them a native of the name of Miago, who remained absent with them for several months. I saw him on the N.W. Coast, on board the ‘Beagle,’ apparently perfectly civilized: he waited at the gun-room mess, was temperate (never tasting spirits), attentive, cheerful, and remarkably clean in his person. The next

“time I saw him was at Swan River; where he had been left on the return of the ‘Beagle.’ He was then again a savage, almost naked, painted all over, and had been concerned in several murders. Several persons here told me ‘You see the taste for a savage life was strong in him; and he took to the bush again directly.’ Let us pause for a moment and consider.

“Miago, when he was landed, had, amongst the white people, none who would be truly friends of his; they would give him scraps from their table, but the very outcasts of the whites would not have treated him as an equal—they had no sympathy with him; he could not have married a white woman; he had no certain means of subsistence open to him; he never could have been either a husband or a father, if he had lived apart from his own people. Where, amongst the whites, was he to find one who would have filled for him the place of his black mother, whom he was much attached to? What white man would have been his brother? What white woman his sister? He had two courses left open to him. He could either have renounced all natural ties, and have led a hopeless joyless life amongst the whites, ever a servant, ever an inferior being, or he could renounce civilization and return to the friends of his childhood and to the habits of his youth. He chose the latter course; and I think I should have done the same.”

When natives who have lived for some time with Europeans return to their former mode of life, people persist in saying now, as they said to Sir George Grey, “the taste for a savage life was strong in them.” My experience of civilized and christianized natives, and my information concerning them, extending now over a period of more than twenty years, enable me to say most positively that the civilized and christianized native has no taste whatever for savage life. Give him suitable companions, give him suitable occupation, and he is as happy and contented a man as any upon the face of the earth.

This, then, is my answer to those who ask why these children go to a far-off Institution as they grow up: They go that they may find there suitable companions and suitable occupation. And why should any inhabitants of this Colony grudge to these few poor creatures this measure of happiness; this means of Christian living? It is said: “They ought to remain here; the inhabitants of this Colony ought not to be deprived of their services.” What! are there not enough of these people, old and young, in all parts of the Colony, without laying hands on these? Are there not enough half Europeans, and more than half Europeans, roaming about uncared for and neglected. Will not these serve the purposes of would-be employers? If people want servants from this class do I say anything unreasonable when I say—Let them make Christians of them; let them make servants of them themselves: doing this they will do something towards the discharge of a great duty to God: something, also, they will do towards wiping out a foul blot which is now a disgrace to us as a Christian people. If would-be employers do not care for the souls of those about their homesteads and stations, how can we suppose that they would care for the souls of these poor little outcasts, who have been rescued and brought home and watched over for their Saviour’s sake?

I entreat, then, that no impediment may be thrown in the way of removals such as those I have referred to. I have spent no public money in such removals; and I have no wish so to spend it. All I ask is that those children who are, or who may be, brought up in this Institution may, as they grow out of their childhood, be left, as free agents, to dispose of themselves as they may desire, and as the advice and counsel of myself and other friends may guide them.

The Honorable The Colonial Secretary.

I have, &c.,
MATHEW PERTH.