

NOTES OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE

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MARCH 1883.

Having recently returned from a six month trip to the new world, I have been met with numerous enquiries respecting the Australian Colonies, more especially as regards their suitability as a field for emigration and a future home for the working classes of England.

I have spent three months in Australia and travelled round the entire Eastern coast. I passed a week in Melbourne, another in Sydney and three weeks in Brisbane, from thence we travelled by the Southern and Western Railway of Queensland across the great dividing range of mountains, through Toowoomba and on to Macalister and from there to Jimbour where I remained seven weeks, engaged on the telescopic survey of the Southern Hemisphere, and then returning to Brisbane. I embarked on the R.M.S. Merkara and returned by the East coast route calling at Rockhampton, Mackay, Bowen, Townsville, Cooktown and Thursday Island.

I merely mention this to show that my notions of the country are not derived from any one spot but from a pretty extensive travel round. Nevertheless I am fully aware how very superficial is the knowledge gained by even this, and one needs years instead of months to learn much about Australia.

The first impression of an Englishman landing at Melbourne cannot fail to be one of surprise, especially when we remember that on its site only 40 years ago only two wooden shanties were to be seen. Now we find a large and populous city. The streets are wide and straight, and laid out at right angles to each other, and the Buildings occupied as banks and the larger commercial establishments, Hotels etc. are solidly built of stone, and of magnificent architecture, and ornamented with beautifully executed statuary so that they would be an ornament even to London, whilst the profusion of articles of luxury and elegance is not to be beaten even in Regent Street itself. The Governor's House is situated on an eminence just out of the Town and close by is the observatory from the tower of which you can see over the whole city, with the spires of numerous churches, the fine dome of the Exhibition Building, the Picture Gallery and Museum, and beyond all the fine expanse of Hobson's Bay in which the largest vessels can anchor in safety.

Sydney, though much older, cannot boast of the regularity so apparent in the streets of Melbourne, neither is it so extensive; it can however claim to have the finest Harbour in the world, with such deep water that large vessels like the 'Liguria' drawing 26 feet of water can draw close to the wharf to unload. This is of course an immense advantage, and the water is always alive with vessels coming and going to all parts of the world. Here too they have the steam tram-way in successful operation, and here is the most magnificent and commodious public library I ever saw. The Art Museum is not large, but the examples of painting and sculpture have been judiciously selected, and there are two marble figures here executed by a Sydney sculptor, which for elegance of figure and graceful expression I have never seen equalled.

Mention must also be made of the Botanic Gardens here, which are charmingly situated on the shores of the Bay and filled with the most beautiful tropical plants and flowers most tastefully arranged. These at the time of my visit were in full splendour, and the winding walks displayed new charms of nature and art at every turn.

Brisbane is nothing like either Melbourne or Sydney - it is however a busy place, and Queen Street, the principal thoroughfare, can boast of some fine shops, and a good display of almost everything imaginable for sale, but nearly all, as in the other two cities, brought out from England. The streets are laid out at right angles, but the houses are mostly wood and built with no attempt at regularity, and it has altogether the appearance of a city of the future. Here and there stone buildings of considerable architectural pretensions and solidity are being erected, and there is every indication that in the future this will be a large and populous place.

I have thus briefly sketched these three principal places, as they are the general landing place of people from England, and the first thing that impresses one is that though he is on the other side of the world, he is not in a strange land, everything is English, the people are of your own country and language, the shops exhibit just the same things as in London. The Railway Station at Melbourne has a bookstall after the W H Smith style, and here and at Sydney and even Brisbane, you have the too familiar sounds of the eternal street organ droning out the old familiar ditties of home.

Besides these are the three best (in fact the only) cities of any size round this side of Australia, and the likeliest places for Mechanics and tradesmen to find employment, and employers of labour from all the up country stations are always on the look out on the arrival of every ship to secure the men they require.

In the vicinity of these cities much building is going on and many factories, Engineering establishments etc. employ a large number of hands, and I came across several new arrivals while at Brisbane who found employment directly they landed. Bricklayers, Stone Masons, Carpenters, Painters and particularly all round handy men get plenty of work and good pay, and as living is cheap, they can do very well.

A man can Board and Lodge for 18/- a week and lodging houses are in every street - this means a comfortable bed, a good meat breakfast, a substantial dinner, and a good meat tea, in fact food here is unlimited, meat being about 3d. a pound - a whole half sheep 5/- and so on.

There are however two bad things about Brisbane, the water supply is so managed, or rather mismanaged, that the fluid is of a thick yellow colour, and so suggestive of being filled with living matter as to require a great effort to swallow; in fact it is dangerous to drink much water here at all, and no doubt this is the cause for the large consumption of alcoholic liquors.

The sewage is just as badly looked after. No proper provision is made for the removal of offensive matter, and this must be called a dirty town. This is remarkable in the Capital of a large Colony like Queensland, but it is comparatively young yet, and no doubt these things will right themselves in time.

It is but right to mention that living is not so cheap in Melbourne and Sydney, and it is the height of imprudence to land in either of these places without a fair supply of those good friends of all travellers, viz, the English Sovereign, as in case of not at once finding the employment required, the unprovided stranger would soon find himself, to use a common phrase, "on his back" or in other words, helpless and obliged to take anything which might turn up, and thus lose the advantage of a fair start.

There is one important piece of advice I would give to those who might be thinking of leaving old England - if you are a man of middle age, with a wife and family - and one settled in a fair and permanent position at home - don't leave it. You are best off where you are, but for those thousands of rising youngsters in England with smart heads and young blood for which the old country cannot find fair elbow room, then I would say be off to the new world, don't mind hard work and roughing it and you can assure yourself a position and a degree of comfort by the time you arrive at middle age which you could never acquire at home.

To the agricultural classes, Australia is a veritable land of plenty - but things are on a very different scale to what they are at home - instead of the enclosures of a few acres - we here see paddocks and runs extended for many miles - and it is no uncommon thing to see a wire fence 20 miles in length and you may ride 60 miles round one station - while the flocks of sheep and herds of cattle and horses are simply countless.

When an Emigrant of this class lands (we will say at Brisbane) the agents of some of these up country stations are generally there, looking for hands, and a man of any ability soon gets an engagement, and perhaps finds himself booked for a station 600 or 700 miles up country, and now begins his new experiences. He soon finds that either no railway at all runs his way, or if it does it only takes him on a very little way toward his destination, and the great means of locomotion here is the dray.

Now an Australian dray needs a special description for it has to perform quite a different class of work to the vehicle of the same name in England. For whereas at home a few miles is the extent of the journey, here they have to travel for months together, and carry every thing required for it is only at very distant intervals that a town or a few huts are met with, and supplies are not to be depended on, so rations have to be taken on and sufficient beef, flour, tea and sugar for the distance of the first station, which may be a fortnight's march, are packed on, as well as blankets for a camp out, and many other things.

The Brisbane Railway Station being the terminus of the Southern and Western Railway of Queensland is a rather extensive and busy place and one feels quite at home with the life and movement to which you are accustomed at home, but when you come to the end of your railway journey and find yourself deposited at some little up country station, you begin to open your eyes. The Station at Macalister to which I was conveyed consisted of a little office about 12 foot square, a scanty shed for passengers, and goods shed situated in the middle of the great plain of the Darling Downs. Here the line is so straight and level that you can see it melt away in fine perspective for 12 miles either way - and besides the Station Master's House, no other building is within that distance.

That official and a boy are the staff of the place, there is no porter, no Hotel, no place of refreshment, in fact not even a tree for miles over the vast plain, so you may guess one's feelings on finding yourself left alone with your luggage at this lively spot. Perhaps by a lucky chance the dray is there to take you on, or perhaps not. If it is there, they will not make a start that day - for there are only two trains daily on this section of the line, and the train which leaves Brisbane at 6 a.m. does not reach Macalister till 3.30 p.m. so you have to camp for the night, if your people are there waiting for you, you are lucky, for you are sure of a good meal, if not, you are likely to go hungry to sleep for you are far away from any place of refreshment, and the utmost extent of the Station Master's civility will be to allow you to sleep on the floor of the wool shed - with a tarpaulin doubled up for a bed and a sack or an old blanket for covering. This was my accommodation the first night of my arrival, but as the dray-men were there to convey our instruments I did not want for food, such as it was.

A good fire was lit in the Station Yard on which a pail of water was soon boiled - and with the addition of plenty of tea and sugar there was abundance of the cup which cheers but does not inebriate. The frying pan was next produced and filled with abundance of good beef steak, which soon sent up a savory smell - and when done, some loaves of bread were forthcoming from a sack beneath one of the drays and there was a feast to which hungry men could do ample justice - the pail of tea, pan of steaks and bread were placed on the ground and the dray-men being grouped round in all sorts of easy attitudes, each man dipped his pannikin into the pail, or lifted a lump of beef out of the pan on his knife, or cut huge slices of bread as he liked, for there was abundance for all, and when their hunger was appeased we sat round the camp fire listening to their tales of Bush life and adventures, till the stars glittered thick above us, when having to be up early we turned in, and probably slept better and more sweetly on the hard floor than some do in a bed of down.

A days work with a couple of drays (they generally travel in pairs) begins with rising with the dawn, and while one man goes to get in the cattle (which have been hobbled and left to graze for the night) his mate gets breakfast, and as bread can't be carried because of getting stale and useless it has to be made every day, so he has to make sufficient Damper, as it is called, each morning for the day's consumption.

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Typed by John Grover (Great grandson)

Checked by Jerry Grover (Great great grandson) 28 May 1998

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