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‘Wallace’s Australasia.’¹

These useful volumes of Mr. Stanford’s are, it is well-known, based upon the German work (“Die Erde und ihre Völker”) of Hellwald. It is, however, not surprising to find that Hellwald’s book has proved of very little service for the present volume. Mr. Wallace, than whom no more competent editor could possibly have been chosen, tells us that not more than a tenth of the work is borrowed from the German original, and we can very well believe it. The great English colonies of the southern hemisphere, which form by far the most important, if not the most interesting sections of this volume, are not likely to be treated by any German in a manner suited to the requirements of English readers, and the vast regions of Oceania, except in a few places such as Samoa, have not been much explored by German savants or traders. Now, indeed, that German enterprise is calling for colonies, the South Seas may become of more interest to Germany, and there is already a reference to the blessings which Hamburg traders have conferred upon the Navigator’s Islands, which, we feel sure, Mr. Wallace has allowed to stand out of a little mischievous irony. But for the most part Englishmen are the only persons who have either the right or the power to speak on the contents of this volume of the series, and it is right that they should speak at first hand. No one has a better title to give an account of the Malay Archipelago than Mr. Wallace himself, and with the exception of a few Dutch officials probably no one has a title half so good. As for Australia and New Zealand no foreign account could for a moment be accepted.

The present volume fully preserves the level of excellence marked out by Mr. Keith Johnston’s “Africa,” and Mr. Bates’s “South America.” Its maps are not only very numerous, but of admirable execution, more than supplying the place of the most voluminous atlas. The statistics, as well as the physical and geographical treatment of the Australian Colonies, are exceedingly full, and brought up to the latest dates, while the difficult but necessary apportionment of space to botanical, geological, zoological, and ethnological details is very successfully managed. Indeed, the book, like its predecessors, is not only a valuable book of reference, but one which can be read continuously with profit and with pleasure. Mr. Wallace’s excellent volume of “Sketches on Tropical Nature” had already shown him to be possessed of the faculty of succinctly stating large bodies of facts without sacrificing literary attractiveness, and this faculty is equally well exemplified in the present volume. As an instance of it we may point to the exhaustive and yet compact account of the Aborigines of Australia, and to the chapter, most interesting at the present time, on New Guinea and the Papuans.

There is one point which must strongly impress any

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reader of the book, and that is the thoughts which it suggests as to the apportionment of the vast regions dealt with among European Powers. At present it is well known that we ourselves possess the whole of Australia and New Zealand, with a few outlying islands, such as the Fijis, and shall probably soon be driven by manifest destiny to take, first informal and then formal, investiture of New Guinea. Spain holds

the Philippines and part of the Carolines and Ladrões; Holland rules the Malay Archipelago in a way which, for a wonder, is alike beneficial to the rulers and the ruled. America has made various indirect, and so far not successful, attempts in the Sandwich Isles and elsewhere. France protects the Society Islands, and occupies New Caledonia, with very little benefit to herself or anybody else. Germany has just established, or is about to establish, her footing in Samoa on a regular basis. Now of all these foreign rules the Dutch is the most successful, the Spanish next. We ourselves have done not a little to make the wilderness blossom like the rose, but wherever the wilderness has had inhabitants we have, in one way or another, destroyed or begun to destroy them. So has France, without achieving the material successes which in some degree palliate our own failures. Germany has not yet had time to try her hand, but it is probable, unless the Germans forget all about their home ways, that they will do most harm of all. The easy-going Polynesian or Malay is too evidently not a favourable subject for our religion, our morality, our education, or our law. He simply withers away under them, and the statistics given in this book contain some of the most ghastly records of interference with happy, peaceful lives that history has known since the actions of the first Conquistadores of America. Thirty years of French protection, for instance, have reduced the population of the Marquesas from fifty thousand to a twelfth of that number. Even in islands where the relative decrease has been less, universal testimony shows the degradation of the standard of living, the loss of grace and happiness of life, and the substitution of an imperfect Western civilisation for the suitable if somewhat Arcadian customs and habits of the islanders. Nor is it easy to see, except from a point of view which need not be discussed here, any valid reason for this destruction. Australia, if not New Zealand, was too sparsely peopled, had too great gifts of Nature, and was occupied by natives of too low a type to make much moan necessary in their case. The Spaniards and the Dutch have developed the immense wealth of Malaysia with little harm to the inhabitants. But in Polynesia proper this is not the case. The additions to European commerce made by European occupation of the islands are quite insignificant. The climate, however delightful, is not suitable to Western civilization, morality, or habits of life. Even admitting, which we are by no means ready to admit, that crusades are justifiable, there was nothing in the mode of living of most of the Polynesians which made a crusade necessary or excusable. We, therefore, ourselves to some extent, and the French and Americans to a far greater, have destroyed a sufficient scheme of existence for a large number of people, while we have got no counterbalancing advantage for ourselves, and certainly have conferred none on them. As for morality, this book contains abundant proof that the amiable foibles of the Polynesians have been exchanged for the coarse and destructive habit of drunkenness, the one vice which Western civilization facilitates, and, according to some anthropologists, absolutely encourages. An account of Australasia such as this book contains is one of the heaviest indictments against civilization which can well be drawn. Certainly the instinct of Diderot was not at fault when he found in the account of Tahiti given by its first discoverers an argument for the paradox he had suggested to Rousseau much stronger than anything which his sentimental friend had devised. The Marquesans and the Society Islanders would hardly, we should imagine, join Tennyson's hero in objecting to be vacant of the glorious gains of disease and drunkenness, unhappy living, and uncomely costumes which civilisation has conferred upon such of them as it has not already sent to join their happier ancestors.

¹ *Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel: Australasia*. Edited and Extended by A. R. Wallace. (Edward Stanford.) [On p. 743]

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.