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[p. 3d]

### ‘Australasia’<sup>1</sup>

This valuable and trustworthy compendium of geography and travel, based on Hellwald’s “Die Erde und ihre Völker,” is edited and extended by Alfred R. Wallace, with an ethnological appendix by A. H. Keane. In its pages the hope and the promise of the editorial preface is amply fulfilled. “Notwithstanding the great number of islands and groups comprised within the area treated of, none of any importance have been left without proportionate notice; and I venture to hope that the volume will be found to contain a condensed but accurate summary of geographical information on one of the least known but most varied and most interesting of the great divisions of the earth.” A legion of volumes have been ransacked and laid under contribution to supply the contents of this very useful book for reference, replete as it is with reliable detail as to area and geographical limits, physical features, climate, natural history, geology, colonisation, population, production, trade, and the many *[[illeg.]]* of our colonial dependencies. That vast extent of land and sea known as Australasia and destined to play so important a part in the history of the redundant populations of Europe is divided into six parts by Mr. Wallace, the partitions being:—Australia, including Tasmania; Malaysia, comprising the islands of the Malay Archipelago from Sumatra to the Phillipines and Moluccas, the home of the true Malay race; Melanesia linking together the chief islands inhabited by the black and woolly-haired race from New Guinea to the Fiji islands; Polynesia, encircling all the larger islands of the Central Pacific from the Sandwich Islands southwards; Micronesia, that engirdles the small islands of the North Pacific; and the group named New Zealand. An admirable chart registering the depth of the sea shows at a glance to the intelligent reader the various and relative positions of this progeny of islands—one of the most remarkable of which is Easter Island, a mere cluster of rocks without vegetation, in 27 deg. 8 min. S. latitude, and 109 deg. 24 min. W. longitude, the uttermost outpost of the vast series of Pacific islets. The natives, who are reported to be cannibals, are fair Polynesians, resembling those of Tahiti and the Marquesas, of which Herman Melville has written so pleasantly in his “Omoo” and his “Typee.” Here, however, is to be found by the bewildered explorer, lost in a labyrinth of fruitless conjecture, the ponderous remains of some prehistoric people, colossal images, and houses of sculptured stone. The houses, with doors facing the sun, form esplanades as at our fashionable watering-places. The interiors are formed of upright flat slabs on which are painted in black, red, and white, faces and forms of birds, mythic animals, and geometric figures. The rocks on the brink of the sea-cliffs are carved into fantastic shapes, somewhat resembling tortoises, and grotesque visages. In the British Museum may be seen a statue brought from this remote Easter Island. It stands eight feet high, and weighs four tons. The headlands which crown the coast are the sides of huge stone platforms, sustaining enormous images, fifteen of which were to be found on one of the most perfect of these puzzling platforms. The existing natives are ignorant of the origin and use of these stone relics, as well as of the carved wooden tablets covered with strange hieroglyphics which are also found by the curious. At present Easter [p. 3e] Island is, and most probably will ever remain so, the great mystery of the Pacific. Ever memorable also is that islet of the Sandwich group—Hawaii—where, in the Bay of Karakera, Captain Cook was killed, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1779. Here is situated the stupendous Kilauea volcano, the most remarkable *[[illeg.]]* mountain in the world. The latest eruption of this fiery Titan took place on the night of February 14, 1877; clouds of smoke and vapour shot up to the astounding height of fifteen thousand feet, “covering the heavens for a space of one hundred square miles, and emitting such a strong glare that the whole island was lit up as vividly as by the midday sun, and the light was clearly visible on the distant main.”

The exploration of the Australian interior has frequently been fatal, and nature, in her most forbidding aspect, has placed almost insuperable obstacles to the advance of the settler. Springs of water do not exist, rivers are few, and become mere runlets in summer droughts. The arid plain is covered with “scrub” and “spinifex” or porcupine grass, as it is aptly called (*triodia aritans*) extending for hundreds of miles, and probably covers a greater space of ground than any other Australian plant. “Scrub” is of two different kinds. “The Malee scrub,” which is formed of a bushy eucalyptus, growing like our osiers to a height of between eight or ten feet, and the more unwelcome “Mulga scrub,” a prickly acacia, which tears alike cloth and flesh. The bush of Australia abounds in basins of inland water, nearly all of them, however, saline, and the painful diaries of battled travellers teem with disappointment of expectant rains. “The clouds disperse before the vapours are sufficiently condensed to produce rains. The heated ground raises the temperature of the superincumbent air to such a degree that the already perceptible moisture is again dissolved into vapour. The fatal consequence is that Australia possesses nothing but coast streams or intermittent watercourses in the interior, and although it appears on the maps as a large island the heart of the country is occupied by deserts as arid as those of the great continents.” The Murray and the Darling, however, are exceptionally noble rivers. They are situated in the south-east, and together form a water system worthy of comparison with the larger rivers of Europe and Asia. The common animals of the Northern Hemisphere—pigs, cats, foxes, hares, bears, deer and oxen—are all absent, the native dog, or “dingo,” being the sole animal which reminds the settler of animal life at home. In their stead are found marsupials, or pouched animals, kangaroos, and wallabies. Of the former animal an anecdote, not perhaps well authenticated, is current. A Scotch farmer about to emigrate to Australia in the early days of its colonisation was told by a friend that “a’ there was kangaroos,” “And is na kangaroo money as gude as it her money?” was blue-bonnet’s ready reply. Two of the most peculiarly-shaped animals on our globe are found in common with the wombat, bandicoots and rabbit-rats—the duck-billed platypus and the echidna, or spiny ant-eater. The latter animal has a long, flexible, and cylindrical tongue covered with a viscous secretion which is like bird-lime to the fowler. Chapters full of interest and instruction treat of the birds, the reptiles, fishes, and insects. The black aborigines of Australia, now rapidly on the decrease, are almost as peculiar as its flora and the fauna. They undoubtedly occupy a very low scale of humanity, and their huts are wretched affairs. They devour greedily the mammalia and birds when the chase is successful, at other times they eat lizards, snakes, frogs, white ants, the larvae of any insect, and the body of a certain kind of moth, which is said to be “a fat and delicious morsel.” Many of the tribes practise cannibalism, “human *[[illeg.]]* being eaten not only from necessity, but from choice. Old women are often killed for this purpose, and even wives and children in times of scarcity.” The tribes of the country barter amongst themselves, the Watchandies of West Australia, in return for fishing nets, shells for drinking vessels, and flints, giving to the men of the north and south gums from the grass-tree, and the beautiful rose-coloured crests of a species of cockatoo. Women are in the most abject state of slavery, in striking contrast to the petted condition of our English wives, as evidenced by Mr. Weeks on the walls of the Royal Academy in his vigorous, able, and truthful picture, “Her Lord and Master” *[[illeg.]]*. Numerous maps and illustrations give additional zest and value to this valuable volume. An index, careful and copious, concludes it; and it may with justice be pronounced a work in every way worthy of its well-known publisher Mr. Stanford, whose name is a guarantee for a genuine product.

<sup>1</sup> Australasia. By A. R. Wallace, F.R.G.S. London: E. Stanford, Charing-cross.