HERMANN KLAATSCH'S VIEWS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

John Collette

A few words of comment on Hermann Klaatsch and his ideas on the evolutionary significance of the Aborigines are invited by Brigitte Stehlik's introduction to her translation of Klaatsch's account of his visit to Melville Island in 1906.1

In an address to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1907 Klaatsch informed his audience that his objective in investigating the Australian Aborigines was to 'attack the difficult problem of the origin of the Australian blacks, and of their importance in relation to the whole development of mankind'.2 In judging their relevance Klaatsch proceeded from a polygenist view of human evolution in which a primitive group of higher Primates — the 'Propithecanthropi' or earlier ape-men — had divided into western and eastern branches at a very early date, each subsequently splitting into races of men and apes. He claimed to see affinities between the gorilla, Neandertal man and Africans, and between the orang, Pithecanthropus, Aurignacians and the populations of Australia, the Pacific, southern Asia and Europe. Believing the Aborigines to be 'coeval' with Australia itself he agreed with his contemporary Otto Schoetensack that a transition from an ape-like forerunner of man to homo proper had probably occurred in Australia. In the Aborigines he believed he had found preserved 'one of the oldest stages of mankind'.3

Klaatsch did indeed note T.H. Huxley's earlier comments on the resemblances of Australian Aboriginal skulls with those of fossil men recovered from Europe but he ignored Huxley's urgings for caution in assessing the significance of this.4 The osteological similarities he alleged existed led Klaatsch to infer that they shared other physical traits such as skin pigmentation. Indeed Klaatsch went further still and thought they were linked culturally and linguistically.

It should be stressed that many of Klaatsch's contemporaries also pursued rather idiosyncratic ideas on human evolution. Numerous physical anthropologists of his time thought that modern man was very ancient and that racial types were relatively stable for even hundreds of thousands of years. Hence, the notion that fossil specimens could be linked to specific living populations could be earnestly proposed. If one assumed, as did Klaatsch, substantial interconnections between biology, culture and even language in human evolution

John Collette is a research student in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology at the Australian National University. His doctoral thesis involves an examination of the diversity of nineteenth and early twentieth century ideas on the origins and antiquity of the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines.

1 Stehlik 1986.
2 Klaatsch 1907:577.
3 Klaatsch 1908:160.
4 Huxley 1873:93.
then the propensity for tenuous similarities in anatomy, or in elements of culture or technology to be used to support inferences of the existence of a host of unrelated analogous features between certain contemporary peoples and the prehistoric populations of Europe become more understandable.

And so the evolutionary anthropologists of this period examined not only the physiology of 'primitive' peoples but were also interested in their socio-cultural institutions as a source of information on human development. Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines were very prominent in this as they were regarded as among the most primitive and archaic and therefore especially revealing about the primeval state of man. In the several decades to 1920 many writers proposed a great antiquity for the Aborigines and, in fact, for a century the associated idea that they were the surviving representatives of a primitive original human race was a not uncommon component of speculations on their origin.

In Klaatsch's writing the inferring of cultural similarities on the basis of perceived anatomical affinities was particularly blatant. Believing that the Aborigines, as a 'stationary remnant of primitive humanity', were related to the human branch which gave rise to the modern populations of northern and central Europe he unhesitatingly stated that 'the excellent qualities we find in the social life of the Australians today may be transferred to it'. Like so many anthropologists of the time Klaatsch saw in Aboriginal society the underdeveloped antecedents of many institutions and practices of societies at a higher stage of development. For instance, convinced that they had no religion Klaatsch nevertheless saw in their 'child-like ideas' the germ of the process that had led to full religious systems elsewhere.

Even in linguistics Klaatsch believed the Aborigines were of value in revealing the earlier state of man. He claimed to have found a solution to the problem of the origin of the 'Indo Germanic' languages, asserting that Australian Aboriginal dialects contained not only words resembling those in these languages but the remnants of primitive speech.

Klaatsch was responsible for some enduring work as an evolutionary anatomist but many of his ideas on the role of Aborigines in human evolution were somewhat off-beat at the time and appear ludicrous now. It is important, however, to remember that the racial preconceptions of researchers like Klaatsch weakened their ability even to make accurate first-hand descriptive observations. This is illustrated in Klaatsch's instance, for example, by his conclusion that the Aborigines were so primitive as to lack all traces of a marriage system and family structure.

5 Klaatsch 1923:151.

BIBLIOGRAPHY