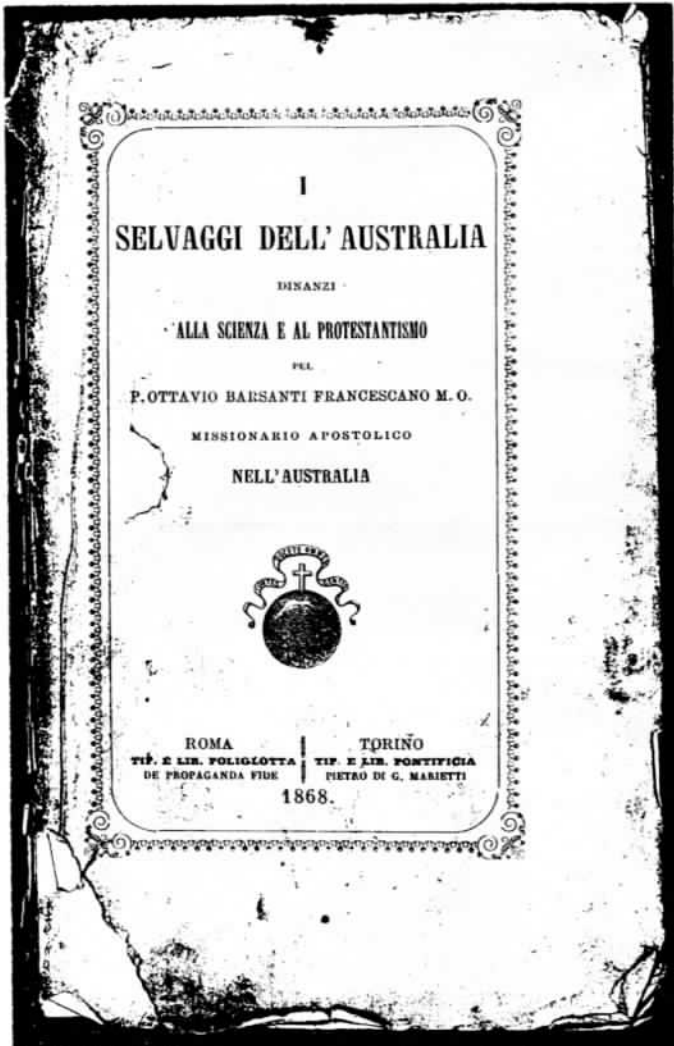


AN EXCITING FIND

by Laura Mecca



Fr. Barsanti dedicated his work to Monsignor Bernardino Trionfetti, the prelate who had admitted him to the Order of Friars Minors and who had sent him to serve as a Franciscan missionary to Oceania.

About the book:

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is an anthropological study of the Aborigines and a biblical and theological analysis of native people in general. The second part is an historical and critical analysis of the Aborigines' origins, history, living conditions, customs, skills and their physical and intellectual characteristics. He also discusses the reasons for the failure of the British to 'civilize' and convert them to Christianity.

Throughout the book, Fr. Barsanti refers to the Aborigines as 'Savages' or 'Australians'. He dedicates a chapter explaining that it would be wrong to interpret the term "savage" as a derogatory term for the natives, and maintains that it is used to define human beings who live in isolation, in their 'natural state' and who have not been subjected to, or have rejected, the 'beneficial' influence of religion or of a 'civilized life'.

About the author:

Fr. Barsanti was a colourful though somewhat tragic figure. He had a fiery temperament. He was born in 1825 in Pietrasanta, Tuscany and, before his mission to New Zealand and Australia, was a lecturer in theology at the Aracoeli in Rome, which was the principal House of Studies for the Franciscans of the Observance. He went to New Zealand in 1860 and served as a Superior from 1862 to 1865. In 1865 he arrived in Sydney and during his four years in this city served at Sacred Heart in Darlinghurst and was secretary to Archbishop Palding, with whom he came into conflict. He migrated to Melbourne in 1869 where he served at St. Patrick's Cathedral until 1872. During his service in Daylesford (1872-5) he came into sharp conflict with another Italian missionary, Fr. Nicola Bassetto. He was sent back to New South Wales and in 1875 at St. Benedict's Broadway had a stand-up fight with Archbishop Vaughan, who suspended him. Fr. Barsanti left the priesthood, but soon regretted it and appealed to Rome against the suspension.

It was with great excitement that, during my recent visit to Rome I spotted and purchased in an antique bookshop *I Selvaggi dell'Australia Dinanzi alla Scienza e al Protestantismo* (The Savages of Australia as opposed to Science and to Protestantism) by Fr. Ottavio Barsanti, Franciscan OFM. This publication reflects nineteenth-century thinking and attitudes towards indigenous peoples, and as such is of historical interest. Despite nineteenth century modes of expression and obvious limitations in the existing anthropological knowledge concerning indigenous Australians, the commentary emphasizes the innate skills, perceptions and abilities of Australian Aborigines.

Published in Rome in 1868 by Propaganda Fide,



Fr. Ottavio Barsanti, Franciscan Missionary to New Zealand and Australia from 1860 to 1884. (Courtesy Fr. T.J. Linane)

He returned to the priesthood shortly before his sudden death from heart disease in Sydney in 1884. He is buried in the churchyard of St. Thomas of Canterbury at Petersham, NSW.

The Italian Historical Society is examining the possibility of publishing this rare book in English. In the meantime, I have translated some of the fascinating perceptions relating to Aborigines as described by Fr. Barsanti, which may be of interest to the Society's members.

The Food of the Australians.

(Extract from Part Two - Chapter V)

Not only marriage, which is at the base of society and the bond of the family, but also food, which is the most important part of life, is regulated by very complicated laws. As nothing is sown by the Australians, nothing is harvested. Thus, their food is very limited in terms of quality and quantity. In Australia there are no fruits or indigenous products which can be classified as staple food for the Savages. To survive they are

forced to live on wild roots, insects, resins and most of all on animal meat, which they procure by hunting or fishing. Ah! If Ovid lived among them and saw them devour these animals without sparing not even the entrails, he would repeat this verse with anger:

*Heu! quantum scelus est in viscere viscera
condi,
Alteriusque animantem animantis vivere
laetho.*

*(Alas! What a crime it is for flesh to be buried
in flesh,
and for one living being to live by means of
the death of another.)*

The most important animals which provide food to the Australians are dogs, birds, Kangaroo, Emu, Opossum, Kangaroorats, Bandicoot, Wallaby, snakes and even bees. But not everybody is allowed to feast on all this food. Young men and women cannot eat certain types of food. Only the children and old people are allowed to eat all sorts of animals, fish, roots and insects. In some tribes, the young people are not allowed to eat Kangaroo, because it is a noble food and is therefore kept for the elders. Other tribes do not eat Opossum or Bandicoot if killed too young. Young women do not eat young and tender animals, except the Wallaby which they can eat when the animal is young and not when it is fully grown. Married women cannot eat emu eggs. Women are not allowed to eat fish caught in the areas where emus lay their eggs.

Other laws apply to the provision of food and are based on the following reasons.

- 1. To impel young men, who are stronger and faster, to hunt the animals which are harder to catch and to leave those easier to catch to the elderly and the incapacitated.*
- 2. To prevent the destruction of those animals which are still capable of reproducing.*
- 3. To avoid diminishing the sustenance resources in the area.*

If the nature of this work would allow it, I would include a Zoology treatise describing the animals eaten by the Savages of Australia. I will however provide a description of only the most important. I said "animals" because who can count the insects or describe the roots? In New Zealand the Maori in winter eat the roots of ferns which are full of starch and quite nourishing. In Australia ferns are not common and the Aborigines have never revealed to the Europeans their herbs, trees

or shrubs from which they eat the roots when they cannot hunt or fish. As a matter of fact, they are very careful not even to mention them in the presence of Europeans, fearing that they would uproot and destroy them for hatred, envy or vendetta.

CAPO V.

DEL CIBO DEGLI AUSTRALIANI.

Ma non solo il Matrimonio, che è la base della società, il vincolo delle famiglie, ma sibbene anche il cibo, la cosa la più necessaria alla vita, è regolato da leggi complicatissime. Siccome gli Australiani nulla seminano così nulla raccolgono; quindi il loro cibo è assai misero e in quanto alla qualità e in quanto alla quantità. Nell'Australia non vi sono né frutti né prodotti indigeni, che si possano considerare come l'ordinario sostentamento di quei Selvaggi. Per campare la vita sono essi da dura necessità costretti a nutrirsi di radici selvatiche, d'insetti, di gomma e sopra tutto della carne degli animali, che si procacciano o colla caccia o colla pesca. Ah! se Ovidio visse, fra i medesimi, al vederli diverrarsi questi animali e non risparmiare neppure

In Australia there are no wolves, tigers, lions or panthers. The only animals which could be classified as ferocious are the dog [dingo] and the seal. The dog is from the Felidae family, it is similar to a fox, does not bark but wails, is very useful to the natives as it can be easily tamed and used when hunting. The seal in Greek mythology is the mermaid, the enchanting goddess on the sea waves. The settlers called it calf or sea cow; it belongs to the family of Phocidae, it is amphibious, lives along the coasts on fish and is between eight and nine feet long. Also the seal is easily tamed.

But the two classical animals of Australia, which are depicted in its national crest, are the Kangaroo and the Emu. The Kangaroo is timid, harmless but alert; it grows up to seven feet high, lives on grass, moves with a skipping action because it does not use its front legs which are very short and are used only when it grazes. It runs very fast when chased: it carries only one foetus and it belongs to the Marsupial family. After some time the foetus transfers from the uterus into the pouch or marsupial, where it fully develops and lives as if in its own bed. The mother does not free herself of her offspring even when it is capable of walking and procuring its own food or when she is chased by hunters. The tail is the best part of the kangaroo. It can weigh up to twelve pounds and it makes an exquisite stock.

The Emu is the largest bird after the New Zealander Moa and the African Ostrich. It lays

between eight and ten eggs, and each one is equivalent to fifteen eggs of one of our domestic fowls. Its feathers which consist of many thin rows, are scarce and just enough to cover the skin. On its back it has a very useful adipose tissue: they say it is so thin that it slides off a crystal bottle. The Emu can run faster than dogs and horses. The easiest way to catch it is after it has drunk water from a pond; it drinks so much water that it swells, becomes sick and often dies. The Emu and the Kangaroo can be tamed to follow their masters like little dogs.

CAPO XII.

DELLE QUALITÀ E DONI DEGLI AUSTRALIANI.

Gli Australiani si distinguono in molte cose, che possono dirsi *abilità o attitudini naturali*. Fra queste si dee porre

1. *La loro grande facilità d'imitare qualunque cosa.* Alcuni Selvaggi delle tribù d'Illawarra essendo stati condotti al teatro di Sidney, dove si rappresentava l'opera del famoso *Der Freischutz*, tornati appena alle loro foreste, non solo furono abili a raccontare ai propri gli atti principali di quell'opera, ma anche riprodurre tutto ciò, che v'era di mimico. Un Europeo li visitò sei anni dopo, e a sua gran sorpresa trovò, che non solo ritenevano l'idea più chiara, di quell'opera, ma perfino la riprodussero in sua pre-

(1) Flanagan. Op. cit. v. I. C. VII. §. 6.

The Qualities and Talents of the Australians

(Extract from Part Two - Chapter XII)

The Australians distinguish themselves in many ways, which can be described as their abilities or natural aptitudes. Among these, we must include:

1. *Their great capacity to imitate anything. A group of Savages of the Illawarra tribes were taken to Sydney to the performance of the opera of the famous Der Freischutz. When they went back to their forests, they skilfully recounted the main events of the opera and re-enacted the scenes. A European who visited them six years after, found, much to his amazement, that they still remembered the opera very clearly. They re-enacted it before him during one of their evening celebrations.*

To their art of imitating one has to add:

2. *Their ability of tracking people by scent and of finding any lost objects. In some instances they were able to track in forests never crossed by human footprints of men lost fifty or a hundred miles further away. Thus if anything, an animal a man or a*

child gets lost, it is sufficient to seek the help of one of these Aborigines to find him dead or alive. The following example can be taken as proof. A murder had taken place but the judiciary did not have any evidence of why or where it had been committed. Only some suspicions. As they wanted to solve the case, they sought the help of one of these Natives. He was taken to the banks of a river where they suspected the crime had been committed. The Native inspected the area all around, went close to the river's edge, sniffed the air, drank some water from the river and soon after said: the murdered body is here. And so it was.

To this power of their senses, one has to add:

3. The skill to describe, classify and call by its proper name all plants, roots, animals, insects; skills which could be called memory and semiological power. The Australians are not naturalists by study and art, but by nature. Had they studied Plinius and Cuvier they could not possibly know the science of Botany or Zoology any better.
4. And last but not least, their agility in fighting and in climbing trees; the sharpness of their sight is capable of distinguishing even the most minute objects far away; and their exceptional capacity to hit targets. These are all proper and characteristic qualities of the Savages of Australia, which confirm that nature is impartial and that if it lacks in one area, it compensates in another.

But how could I not mention throwing the Boomerang? I had read and heard marvellous things about this instrument and I could never believe them as they appeared to be impossible and an illusion. But at a public show that took place in Sydney, at Redfern, to celebrate St. Patrick's day, I changed my mind. After a few uneventful performances, an Australian of the Colony of Victoria came on to the open field with his boomerang and threw it to the ground with total indifference. The boomerang began to spin around like a top in a perfect circle. Then, after whirling it around two or three times, he let it go. The boomerang shot into the air like a sky-rocket, went up and down a few times, made several turns, then it shot off to remove the hat of a gentleman and finally returned to the thrower's feet amidst loud cheers and the appreciation of the spectators. Thrown a third time, the

boomerang glided close to the ground around the field like a swallow, then suddenly rose, came down again and then exited through the fence and flew to hit the omnibus on which the Native came and then flew back to his feet, much to the amazement of the crowd. These things cannot be believed if not seen. As the boomerang becomes a lethal weapon in the hands of the Australians, the Government prohibits its throwing in areas where the Europeans live.

I want to add another word about the talents of the Australians. In a race which represents man in his primitive natural state, in a race which has lived isolated for centuries, unknown to the world and wandering in a very large continent, in a race which has no history or memories of the past, it would be foolish to try to detect those nice prerogatives which ennoble human nature and demonstrate to what level of excellence it [human nature] can rise through education. Philosophy teaches that in nature there are no jumps; as for the vegetative, organic and animal life that develop gradually, the intellectual and civil life also follows this pattern. Thus, to degrade the Savages to the condition of brutes because they do not show those moral qualities which highlight human nature, is an insult to this race not as a collective of individuals, but as a species and therefore an insult to nature itself. What a young man is in the physical order as an individual, the Savages are in the moral order as a species. This must be never forgotten in studying the customs of barbarian people. All those who have seen only animalism, passions, brutal instincts and ferocious sentiments in the Australian Aborigines and have depicted (as in a painting) the deformity of their degradation, have done nothing else but degrade themselves. To claim that they have no talent, morality, intelligence, nor common sense, is an insult to human nature. Those who only see them wandering here and there in the forests of their territories, cannot to judge the degree of development and dignity of their gifts and natural talents.

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