

THE PROBLEM OF THE HALF-CASTE

This article concludes the arguments put forward last week by Mr. W. E. H. Stanner on the half-caste problem, which he has studied at first hand in the Northern Territory.

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There is no easy escape from the problem of the Australian mixed-blood.

We can expect it to become more difficult of solution with every year that passes, not only because of the certain increase of mixed bloods, but because each year new tribes will be touched by settlement.

Miscegenation is neither escape nor solution. The attitude of most people towards the mixed-blood is made up of vague sympathy, prejudice, and incomprehension.

In the face of this, any scheme of miscegenation cannot be regarded as even a partial solution. It also runs the risk of raising a wretched border colony of lost souls.

RACIAL SENTIMENTS

Racial sentiments are not likely to change readily, and at the moment we discriminate bitterly against mixed-bloods. Many of us despise them, for reasons not always clear. Nearly all, if faced with a decision, would refuse to associate with them upon terms of equality.

This is not a criticism of the attitude, so much as a statement of fact, but it leads one to ask: Is it reasonable to expect that the children of "encouraged" marriages would be treated differently?

If miscegenation were officially sanctioned, it is most improbable that many whites would marry mixed-bloods. Those who did would, on the whole, be "poor whites," inferior or "fallen" types. I do not say all, but certainly most.

A great deal of the loose talk of the "inferiority of the half-caste" has arisen because many white men who have associated with aboriginal

women are, even by generous tests, of a low-average type.

A very different story might be told if above-average whites married above-average native women, and if the children were not stigmatised or otherwise penalised.

SQUALID LIVES

Each year the half-castes multiply. Too many of them are the progeny of inferior types of whites and Chinese.

This is one reason why the fringe of settlement in Queensland, Western Australia, and North Australia has a steadily growing population of mixed-bloods who have no alternative but to live stunted, squalid, repressed lives, probably far below their potential level.

The mental capacity and social potentialities of the mixed-blood are unknown quantities. Our attitude to him has kept them so.

We are a nation with a large native population—and no clear native policy. Vague suggestions of miscegenation are, under the conditions I have pointed out, little more than clumsy experimentation.

Most interested and informed people agree upon certain essentials:

- (1) There must be a clearly outlined policy in regard to (a) full-bloods and (b) mixed-bloods. These are separate problems. Neither has been faced.
- (2) There must be a separate Commonwealth Native Administration with adequate financial support.
- (3) Administrative officials and protectors must be properly trained. The African and New Guinea administrations are attempting to do this.
- (4) Native law must be properly codified.
- (5) There must be more money for research to discover, and confirm what is known of, the economic capacities of both mixed and full-bloods.

If miscegenation is permitted or encouraged, a radical revision of the general public attitude towards mixed-bloods is necessary. The terms upon which such a scheme will succeed are to give the hybrids complete equality of political, legal, and social status and complete equality of economic opportunity. To do less than this would be to court trouble.

Apart from the difficulty our noted racial squeamishness would place in the way, this ideal is impracticable in itself.

Miscegenation seems to me to be a blunder. A practical, constructive native policy is possible without it. There are many people in Australia who will gladly help in every possible way to this end.

Now the degree of blending, and to what extent Mendelian principles apply, that is, how strongly contrasted characters, which do not blend, are inherited.

Some observers (not in Australia) have noted that often in racial crosses more primitive features (such as the jutting forward of the face, thick lips, depression of the nasal bridge) yield to more highly evolved features, but not always so.

This may happen with many of the primitive Australian features, but there is no certainty. The superficial appearance of a great many mixed-bloods does not conform to this.

What has apparently happened in a racially mixed population is no necessary guide to what has actually happened. This is what makes it possible for sudden reversion to the primitive ancestral type to occur. Recessive characters, lying dormant, may show out when mating has favored their appearance.

There seems to be no reason why the racial characteristics of the Australian aborigine should so blend (as so many people assert) with white characteristics that each generation of back-crosses brings the hybrid offspring closer to the white type. It is probably very easy to gain this impression from superficial observation over a short period of a few generations of small hybrid families, or of special members of hybrid families.

Far from being the last thing to expect, the appearance from generation to generation of children showing clear traces of their aboriginal ancestry is always to be expected, and feared, until it is shown with some authority that this has not been the experience in mixed-marriages so far.

Even then, it would still be possible after many generations for one or some of the recessive characters (perhaps skin color or facial contours) to show out in a child. Heredity plays strange, unpredictable tricks.

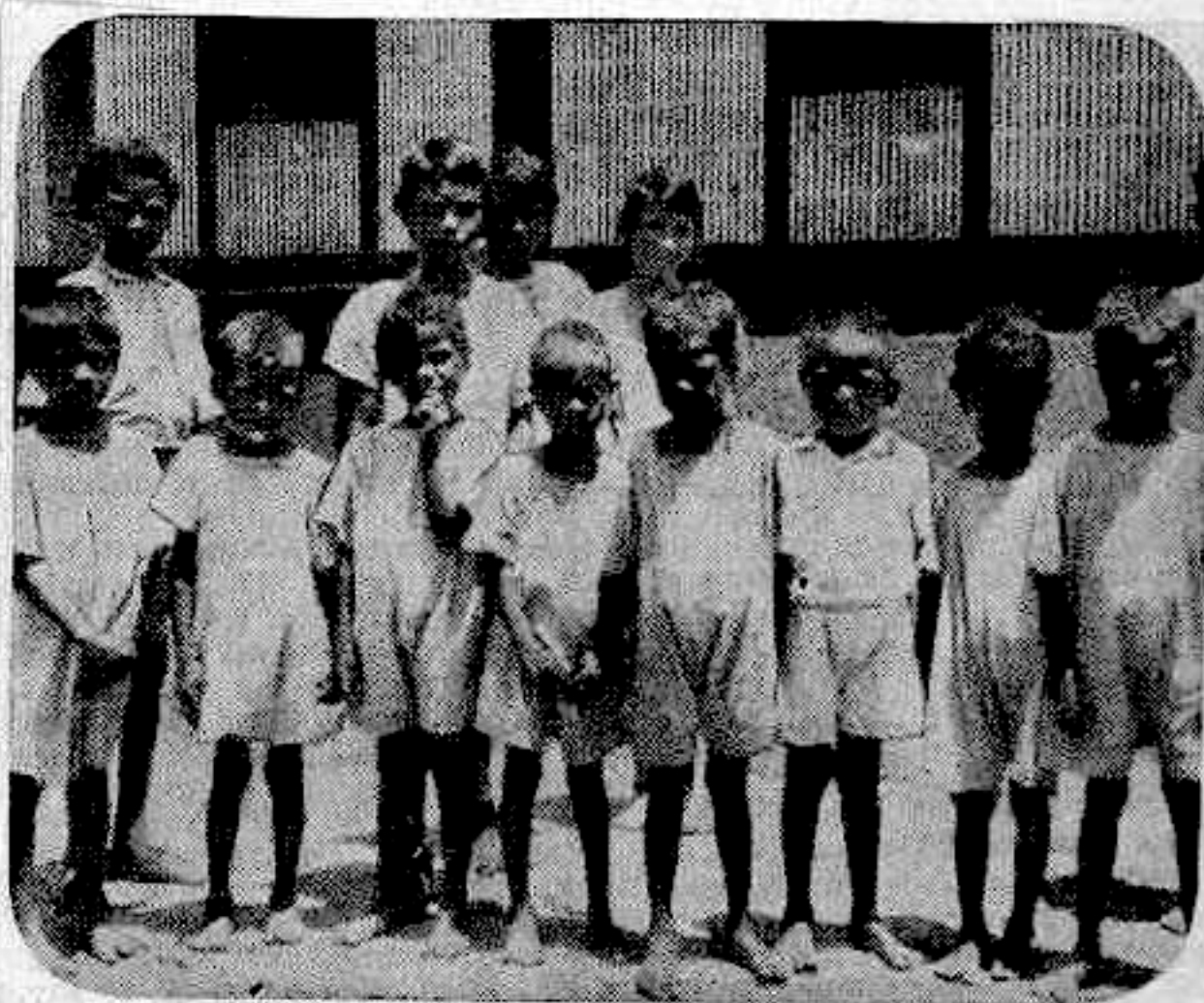
One hears many reports of men and women who have married believing themselves to be "white" and then to have been appalled by traces in their children of mixed ancestry. That is, characters, imagined to have been "bred out," have simply been recessive, and have shown out under the right conditions.

One does not know if these stories are true or false. They may be either. One simply does not know, and the only way of knowing is the only way of establishing scientific proof or disproof of the belief (not the fact) that the characteristic physical features of the Australian aborigine can be bred out in mixed marriage.

Not experiment with lives is wanted, but a strict genealogical examination by a specialist of the descent lines from marriages between Australian aborigines and British Australians.

Hearsay and casual observations are worse than useless. What is needed is a series of well authenticated examples which can be properly studied by a properly trained biologist, or physical anthropologist. Until this is done no amateur is able to do more than talk of probabilities.

There are numbers of people in Australia who possess this information, but perhaps hold it rightly as a well-guarded secret. To a biologist this information would be of great value.



Half-caste children at Alice Springs.