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Herbert Basedow (1881–1933): Surgeon, geologist, naturalist and anthropologist¹

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Herbert Basedow, born in Adelaide to German parents, was to become one of Australia's leading scientists of the first three decades of the twentieth century. He had broad-ranging interests in geology, zoology and botany, but, arguably, is now best remembered for his contributions to Australian anthropology. In his native South Australia, in particular, Basedow was a significant public figure and, by the time of his death in 1933, he was well known as a commentator on a broad range of issues, as an explorer and as a Member of Parliament (MP).

Early life²

Basedow's parents independently emigrated to Australia in 1848. They married in 1868, the second marriage for each (both of their previous spouses had died). Martin Peter Friedrich Basedow was the first Basedow to arrive in Australia, as an 18-year-old, on 31 March 1848. He was destined to become a prominent figure in South Australia, as a teacher,

1 The second part of this title was derived from Stanner (1976: 131).

2 This section is largely derived from Basedow (1990), except where noted.

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journalist, newspaper owner, editor and MP. Anna Clara Helena came from another important German-Australian family in South Australia, the Mueckes. Herbert was born on 27 October 1881, the last of 13 children.



Plate 12.1 Herbert Basedow, about 1925.

Source: Copy of a portrait held by the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

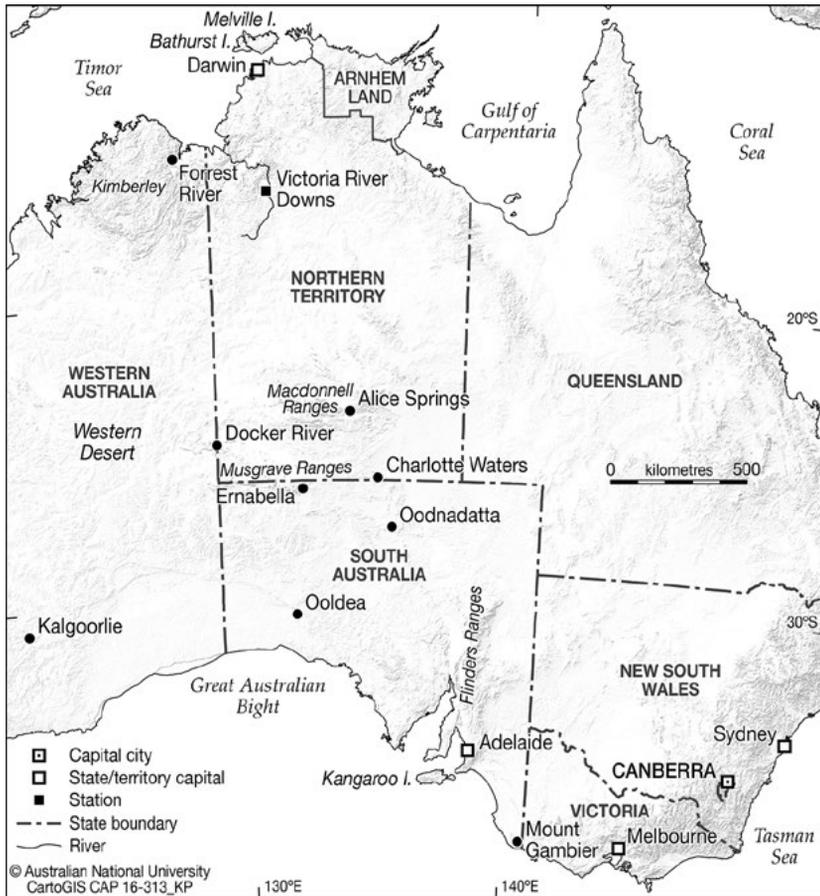
The Basedow family lived at Kent Town, within walking distance of Adelaide's city centre. In fact, Herbert lived there most of his life, later buying and living in the house next door to the family home. He attended Prince Alfred College, proving himself as both a scholar and a sportsman, playing Australian football for the college's First XVIII. Later, he rowed for the University of Adelaide, including in an intervarsity competition in Sydney in 1900.

Herbert's Australian primary schooling was put in abeyance in 1890 when his parents took him and seven siblings to live in Germany. His father's obituary in South Australia's *Australische Zeitung* (*Australian Newspaper*) stated:

In 1890 Mr. Basedow after an absence of 43 years travelled with his wife and 8 children to his fatherland for a period of 3 years' residence. Taking a flat in Hannover, he spent a large part of the three years travelling. He journeyed over most of Germany and visited respectively France, England, Denmark, Sweden, Austria-Hungary, Switzerland and Italy. (Translation, Basedow 1993: 9)

If Herbert accompanied his father on these travels this may have given him his appetite for travelling for, as we shall see, his work would take him to widely varied places, many of which would be seen by only a handful of non-Indigenous people of his generation.

Herbert completed his schooling at Prince Alfred College in 1897, the year he won the Cotton Medal for academic achievement in agricultural chemistry. The following year, he commenced a science degree at the University of Adelaide, graduating in 1902. As well as science and mathematics, he also took subjects such as surveying and mechanical drawing, which would hold him in good stead when he later published his maps of little explored areas such as western Central Australia, which he travelled through in 1903 and 1926, and the north, in 1905, 1916 and 1928 (Basedow 1915, 1916, 1918, 1929b; Mackay 1929).



Map 12.1 Locations mentioned in the text.

Source: CartoGIS, The Australian National University.

Postgraduate study³

Basedow returned to Germany in 1907 to undertake postgraduate study in science and medicine. His first stint was at Breslau University, where he studied geology, physical geography, zoology and philosophy under the renowned scientist Hermann Klaatsch. Basedow and Klaatsch presumably

³ The first part of this section relies heavily on Zogbaum (2010: Ch. 3). She has looked at Basedow's German education more closely than anyone else. Furthermore, as a German speaker, Zogbaum was able to read Basedow's theses.

met in Adelaide in 1907 when the latter delivered a paper on Aborigines at the Science Congress. In his paper, Klaatsch singled out Basedow for high praise:

Close association was secured with the Kunandja tribe, or Kunandra tribe,⁴ as recorded by that gifted young scientist, Mr. Herbert Basedow, whose profound investigations had lightened his own task in that part of Australia.⁵

Klaatsch (1907: 584) made a similar comment in his published paper. He obviously recognised Basedow's potential, as had South Australia's government geologist H. Y. L. Brown earlier (see below), and no doubt encouraged him to go to Germany to study. At Breslau, the geologist professor Fritz Frech supervised Basedow's doctorate in geology and, after three semesters, Basedow obtained his degree. His thesis, a '43-page summary of his own observations and investigations', was on the geology of Australia (Zogbaum 2010: 29). The published version (Basedow 1909), though, has a wider coverage, as demonstrated through maps including localities not visited by Basedow.

In 1908, Basedow commenced medical studies. In preparation, he worked in anatomy establishments with Klaatsch and in Berlin, followed by three months' practice in Switzerland. Following this, he spent one semester at Heidelberg, before switching to the University of Gottingen later the following year. Here he was awarded another PhD, this time in medicine. His thesis was an analysis of craniometric measurements of 172 crania (36 of them Tasmanian), examined at the Hunterian Institute during his vacation in the middle of 1909. As Zogbaum (2010: 30) pointed out, the 36 Tasmanian crania did not suffice for a 'credible statistical average on which he could place weighty conclusions'; however, this was the sample that was available to him. Remarkably, Basedow was awarded two doctorates in a very short time, assisted, no doubt, through credit for work undertaken in Australia.

One idea in Basedow's second thesis, which he would continue to reiterate, was his promulgation of the outdated 'black Caucasian theory', which posited that Aboriginal people and Europeans shared a common

4 Klaatsch is talking about his visit to the Darwin–Daly River area, where Basedow undertook geological work as part of a government expedition in 1905. He later published his anthropological observations and, in his discussion of the 'tribes' of the area, does not mention a group whose name approaches Kunandja or Kunandra (Basedow 1907: 1–3).

5 *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 11 January 1907: 7–8.

ancestry. Klaatsch was an early proponent of this theory and Basedow was one of the next generation of scientists who continued with it. According to Zogbaum (2010: 1), Basedow ‘was the first to supply scientific foundations’ for this theory, in the form of ‘detailed cranial measurements’ presented in his doctorate. One of the unfortunate aspects of this theory as presented by Basedow was that it demonstrated that the intermixing of Aborigines and Europeans eventually ‘breeds out the colour’, without throwback or atavism, resulting in a complete loss of Aboriginal physical features because of their shared ancestry. Klaatsch had speculated that skin pigmentation was confined to the epidermis and, following death, the skin becomes lighter in colour. This theory was to provide a scientific basis for later government policy to solve the ‘half-caste problem’, with the removal of children from their families its most evil consequence. Basedow could not have foreseen this, but it would mean the complete extinction of the ‘Aboriginal race’, for those of unmixed descent were also disappearing, as a result of coming into contact with a ‘superior race’, as far as Basedow was concerned. This was a constant theme with Basedow—something that will be briefly considered below.

Apparently, the change in skin colour could work in reverse, if a newspaper report of one of Basedow’s lectures is to be believed:

When something unexpected happens some day to hurry along the development of Northern Australia, blondes need not apply. Those who are so unfortunate as to ‘favour’ their Nordic ancestors must be content to dwell in the South. Tropical Australia is safe only for people with dark complexions, dark eyes, and black hair. They may go in and possess the land, but, dreadful consequence, must pay for it in terms of skin pigment. In an ‘age or two,’ they will be black. Dr. Basedow is too merciful to say so directly. He adopts a euphemistic negative. Their whiteness, he says, will disappear. Anthropologically, they are more or less identical with the aborigine already; and the black-fellow who does not regard them as ‘radically different from himself,’ will have all the less reason to do so, one must suppose, when the difference becomes indistinguishable.⁶

In 1911, Basedow’s medical qualifications were called into question during the so-called Glacial Controversy, originally a dispute between Basedow’s geology professor, Ralph Tate, who died in 1901, and another geologist, Walter Howchin. Briefly, Howchin had discovered a site that he determined to be a Cambrian glacial site, while Tate—and, after his death,

6 *Register*, [Adelaide], 11 December 1926: 8.

Basedow—put forward an alternative theory for its creation. In a brief look at Howchin's career, Selby (1991: 569) noted that his theory was eventually 'completely vindicated'.

A large part of the Glacial Controversy was played out in the media and in this Howchin was joined by geologist Fritz Noetling. In 1911, Noetling inspected the location of the disputed site and, while Basedow was living for a brief stint in Darwin, said he was going to deliver a paper at one of the next meetings of the Royal Society of South Australia. While Noetling did not want to 'anticipate the contents of [his] paper', he was quite happy to professionally denigrate Basedow, saying his paper would 'show how futile and superficial Dr. Basedow's observations, and his theory based thereon, were'.⁷ Basedow had published his theory in his German paper on Australian geology (Basedow 1909). Basedow returned to Adelaide soon after and was interviewed by the *Register* on 18 September. The last comment in the interview, published the following day, referred to his appointment as chief medical officer in Darwin. In a subsequent letter, Noetling finished by questioning Basedow about his medical qualification.⁸ There is nothing to indicate why he asked this or what it had to do with the Glacial Controversy. Noetling even wrote to the University of Breslau to seek clarification on the nature of Basedow's medical degree. As far as he was concerned, he obtained evidence that Basedow had not obtained the correct qualifications that would entitle him to practice medicine in Germany and outlined the case in another letter to the *Register*.⁹ Basedow received his share of support, with three South Australian medicos writing letters to the *Register* in support of him: Dr Alex Henry,¹⁰ Dr F. Angas Johnson¹¹ and Dr J. R. Kelman.¹² It was not until the following January that Basedow himself responded, after also seeking written advice from the University of Breslau.¹³ It would seem Basedow did not have a case to answer and the South Australian Government, having registered him as a medical practitioner, on 8 September 1910,¹⁴ obviously accepted his credentials.

7 *ibid.*, 4 September 1911: 9.

8 *ibid.*, 2 October 1911: 10.

9 *ibid.*, 27 October 1911: 5.

10 *ibid.*, 28 October 1911: 5.

11 *ibid.*, 30 October 1911: 9.

12 *ibid.*, 11 November 1911: 15.

13 *ibid.*, 18 January 1912: 5.

14 *South Australian Government Gazette*, 1 December 1910. Basedow's Christian name was given as Hubert; this was corrected in the following *Gazette*.

Noetling was not the only one who regarded Basedow in a bad light. As Mulvaney and Calaby (1985: 276) pointed out:

[Baldwin] Spencer regarded Basedow's qualifications and self-promotion with contempt. So did F. Wood Jones, the South Australian anatomist, who described his credentials as an 'impudent parade of degrees, real or assumed; and knowledge, borrowed, stolen or feigned'.

As Mulvaney and Calaby (1985) suggested, perhaps it is time for a reassessment of Basedow. Even though he had his detractors, there is little doubt he achieved a lot over his career.

Basedow's career

By the time Basedow graduated from the University of Adelaide in 1902, he had delivered at least three papers, all on geological subjects, to the Royal Society of South Australia, two of which were later published, along with a summary of the third (Basedow 1901, 1902a, 1902b). The following year, he participated in the first of many major expeditions; between 1903 and 1928, he was to be involved in more than 15 expeditions in Central and northern Australia.¹⁵ He also made shorter trips, mostly in South Australia, but also to other states. These included places such as Mount Gambier, Kangaroo Island, Kalgoorlie and north Queensland. None of these trips was for anthropological purposes, but all were opportunities to undertake anthropology.

The six-month-long 1903 expedition searched for mineral deposits in the far north-west of South Australia and adjoining country in south-western Northern Territory, then under South Australian control. Basedow's role was as prospector, engaged 'through the courtesy of the late Government Geologist (Mr. H. Y. L. Brown, F. G. S.)' (Basedow 1915: 60). According to one newspaper report,¹⁶ Brown selected the expedition's four prospectors and originally Basedow's name was not among them. It was not until Arthur Warman pulled out that Basedow was added, as indicated by other newspaper reports. It would seem Brown, like Klaatsch later, recognised Basedow's abilities and, although he may not have been a first choice

15 See Kaus (2008) and the National Museum of Australia's website (www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/expedition_photographs_h_basedow_1903_1928/central_australia) for overviews of Basedow's major expeditions apart from the vice-regal expedition of 1924. At the time the exhibition and accompanying book were being produced, insufficient detail was known about this expedition for it to be included.

16 *Register*, [Adelaide], 24 February 1903: 3.

for the 1903 expedition, evidently Basedow proved himself worthy of Brown's faith for he was to join him, along with Lionel Gee, on an even longer official geological exploration trip in the north of the Northern Territory two years later (see Brown et al. 1906). From 1906, Basedow began his association with the Flinders Ranges, returning periodically for geological purposes until around 1913. Two papers resulted, one on burials (Basedow 1913a) and a much longer one on rock engravings (Basedow 1914). While he probably did not discuss the former with local Aboriginal people, he may have tried to elicit information about the engravings:

The living generation of blacks in the Flinders Ranges know nothing about the carved productions of art here discussed. They barely recognise in them the handicraft of a people who, in all probability, were their direct ancestors. (Basedow 1914: 198)

At least some of his visits to the Flinders Ranges were undertaken on behalf of the South Australian Government, and his 1910 trip may have been while he held the position of assistant government geologist. He had been appointed on 10 August that year,¹⁷ at 'the expressed request of Mr. Brown'.¹⁸

The following year, Basedow left to take up a Commonwealth appointment in Darwin, advertised as Chief Protector of Aborigines.¹⁹ He was to remain in the position for only six weeks, dissatisfied with his working conditions and unable to get on with the administrator. Basedow had had his title changed to Chief Medical Inspector and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory and, despite holding the position for just a short period, he would continue to refer to it as one of his credentials for many years to come. Before he left Darwin, Basedow made a trip to Melville and Bathurst islands, observing cultural practices and making a collection of artefacts. This also resulted in a published paper (Basedow 1913b).

Around the time of his return south, the positions of chief government geologist and assistant government geologist were advertised. Apparently, it was suggested to Basedow that he not apply, to save him the embarrassment of not being appointed. It seems Adelaide did not want a repeat of recent events in Darwin. Instead, Basedow served locum tenens with a medical practice in 1912, and, in 1913, went into private

17 *South Australian Government Gazette*, No. 38, 11 August 1910: 290.

18 *Public Service Review*, November 1910: 301.

19 *Commonwealth Gazette*, 1911: 774.

practice as a general practitioner and consulting geologist. His business card for the latter reads: 'Geological, Mining, and Petroleum Reports. Examinations undertaken in any part of Australia.'²⁰ After a time, Basedow again became acceptable to both the South Australian and the federal governments, for, in 1919–20, he was to undertake medical inspections of Aborigines at their behest. These expeditions, jointly funded with a number of wealthy pastoralists, medically inspected Aboriginal people in the settled districts in South Australia and the southern part of the Northern Territory. Basedow produced four substantial reports that gave accounts of the expeditions, notes on the Aboriginal groups encountered and information regarding their health (Basedow 1920, 1921a, 1921b, 1921c). These reports remain unpublished and it would not be until 1932 that he published his six-part paper on the health of Aboriginal people. Perhaps surprisingly, given his medical background, this would be his only publication on the subject.

In the interim, in 1916, on behalf of a syndicate of prominent Adelaide citizens, Basedow investigated a reported deposit of 'certain tungstate ores' in the western Kimberley. Again, he planned to undertake scientific investigations:

Realising the rare opportunity for conducting scientific research in a tract of practically unknown country, I resolved that, after the work entrusted me by the Syndicate had been completed, I would on my own account continue the explorations farther afield. (Basedow 1918: 106)

Again, his 'scientific research' included anthropological work and he acknowledged a number of missionaries for 'facilitating [his] ethnological investigations among the local tribes' (Basedow 1918: 106–7).

Basedow was involved in several expeditions in the 1920s. The first was in 1922, a search for oil in the Victoria River area in the Northern Territory, and, in 1923 and 1924, he was a member of two vice-regal trips that travelled to Central Australia by car. There were no anthropological papers published after these trips and his anthropological observations made during these expeditions were incorporated into *The Australian Aboriginal* (1929a), his first book (see below). Finally, in 1926 and 1928, wealthy New South Wales grazier Donald Mackay engaged him and they explored the Western Desert area and Arnhem Land, respectively.

²⁰ Card in State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, PRG 324, Item 3, p. 62 (between items dated 1922 and 1923).

This time, short papers followed, usually just a page or two, sometimes in newspapers, in anticipation of more extensive publications. A brief paper on the 1926 expedition concludes with a note that ‘[f]ull reports on the scientific results of the Expedition will be published in due course’ (Basedow 1929b: 176). It would seem the same was true of the 1928 expedition if the statement saying the ‘extensive’ collections made would be ‘submitted to specialists in due course for identification and description’ is any indication (Basedow 1928). These did not eventuate, but there is a suggestion that when Basedow went to London at the end of 1931, he took with him the manuscript for a book to be published there. If this is true, it must be languishing in a publisher’s basement or in an archive somewhere or is lost.

Basedow was never to hold a position in anthropology. The first chair of anthropology was created in Australia at the University of Sydney, and the appointment of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown led *The Bulletin*²¹ to question filling professorships from overseas. *The Bulletin* continued: ‘But neither case is quite so dreadful as the appointment of a young gentleman in S’ Africa to the chair of Anthropology while the Australian Dr. Basedow was available.’

Soon after, Basedow turned to politics. He had first stood as a Liberal Party candidate in 1924, but was not elected. He stood again in 1927 and this time was successful. He missed out at the 1930 election, but was successful at the following election, in 1933. However, Basedow was not to serve his constituency for long, for he died later that year, on 4 June.

By this time, Basedow was a prominent citizen, was regarded as a more than capable scientist and explorer and was recognised at many levels. He was also adept at self-promotion, and newspapers, not just in South Australia, are full of stories about him, contributing to this widespread recognition. By 1920, they often sought him out for comment.

Basedow and Aboriginal people

Basedow engaged with Aboriginal people at a personal level, which is indicated by such things as his frequent recording of people’s names when he photographed them and the fact that he gained access to secret

21 *The Bulletin*, 23 December 1926.

men's ceremonies when he did not have long-term relationships with people. He explained his approach, a little fancifully, as an anthropologist in *Knights of the Boomerang*:

My work kept me constantly among the natives, who learned to regard me as one of themselves. I used to camp among them and accompany them on their hunting-excursions. An accurate shot from my rifle or occasional minor surgical feat helped to win me their confidence; and so I was able to study them intimately, without allowing my presence to disturb them in the slightest degree. (Basedow 1935: 16)

There are instances where observers have claimed that his interactions in the field could be abrupt and impersonal. Daisy Bates was one of these critics, and, after Basedow's expedition across the Nullarbor in 1920, she wrote to a newspaper implying that all Basedow did at Ooldea was to get Aboriginal people to 'strip and be photographed'.²² Bates had an axe to grind, as she saw Basedow's success in securing the medical relief expeditions as preventing her from securing her desired position as protector of Aborigines (Salter 1972: 180).

Basedow also hosted Aboriginal people at his Adelaide home. One such visitor was Erlikilyika, or Jim Kite, known for his work with Spencer and Gillen and his art (Mulvaney 2001). While little is known about these casual visits, the presence of two young Aboriginal women in the Basedow household from 1920 presents a rather incongruous picture. Unndela, daughter of Charlie Apma, one of Basedow's Arrernte informants, and Tjikana (Aluridja)²³ were taken by Basedow and his wife, Nell, when they were in Central Australia to their home to work as servants.²⁴ Basedow claimed that he had the approval of the 'elders' to take the girls:

When in the MacDonnell Ranges I was desirous of taking two aboriginal children away with me. The circumstance was mentioned to one of the influential old men, who thereupon called together the elders of the tribe; and my request was considered in all its aspects. After a lengthy meeting, during which it was apparent there were two or three dissentient voices, I was finally informed that the children could accompany me under certain conditions which I had to take upon myself to guarantee. This

²² *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 28 June 1920: 9.

²³ This is not the place to consider the validity of this name. It was the term Basedow used for some Western Desert peoples with whom he was involved and was probably first encountered by him on the 1903 expedition, where he recorded the two female Aboriginal assistants as Aluridja speakers (Basedow 1915: 59). Five years later, he published an Arrernte and Aluridja vocabulary (Basedow 1908).

²⁴ See, for example, *Register News-Pictorial*, [Adelaide], 8 January 1929: 10.

agreement arrived at, the children were given to understand that they were going by the direction of the old men, and I officially received the spokesman's word of honour that, firstly, the children would never desert us *en route*, and, secondly, no attempt would be made on the part of the tribe to interfere with us, or steal the children from the camp at night. Had one attempted this under any other conditions and against the will of the tribe, there would have been serious trouble. (Basedow 1929a: 226–7)

There is evidence that shows this 'transaction' was not as amicable as Basedow would have us believe.²⁵ There is also a certain irony here. Apparently, Basedow did not see any conflict in having Aboriginal servants while at the same time pushing for better treatment of Aboriginal people as a whole. He was outspoken on issues such as brutal treatment in the outback, supported relief efforts and was heavily engaged with organised groups such as the Aborigines' Protection League of South Australia; he was its foundation president in 1925. His efforts to obtain better conditions for Aborigines were widely reported in the press and attracted praise in letters to newspapers from time to time. For example, 'Eroosnal' wrote: 'All honour to Dr. Basedow and all other true Christians who are trying to get justice for the black men.'²⁶

A disturbing aspect of Unndela and Tjikana's time in the Basedow household is revealed through Basedow's photographs. Twenty-six photographs of them in Adelaide are known and, of these, six show them topless. While this is revealing about the power relationship between 'employer' and 'staff', it possibly has more to do with Basedow's interest in physical anthropology than anything. It was by no means the only occasion he photographed people in this fashion. There are a few more obvious examples among his photographs where there are front and side views of the same people, either naked or where they have some of their clothing removed. Also see Plate 2 of *The Australian Aboriginal* (Basedow 1929a), which has side views of a white woman and an Aboriginal woman, both naked, presented for comparative purposes. The Aboriginal woman is not Unndela or Tjikana.

25 The author has been shown documentary evidence that Unndela and Tjikana did not want to leave the territory, that efforts were made by Charlie Apma to have Unndela returned to him and his wife, Yoolda, on at least three occasions and that the South Australian authorities were at first unaware of Basedow's 'arrangement', even though it had been made through the office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines. This is a complex story and worthy of telling in full.

26 *Register*, [Adelaide], 13 November 1928: 8.

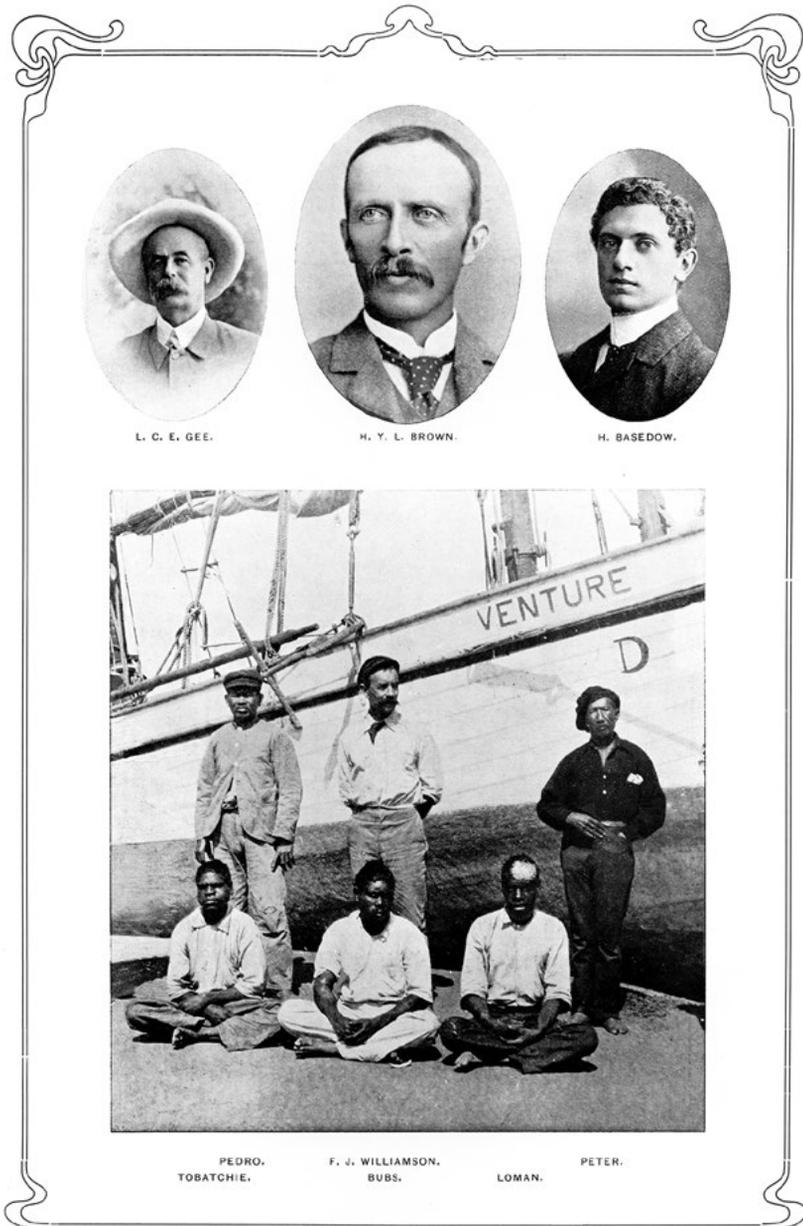


Plate 12.2 Aboriginal people were often engaged to assist on expeditions. This photograph shows members of the 1905 expedition to the north-west of the Northern Territory.

Source: Brown et al. (1906: facing p. 45).

Basedow's anthropology

Basedow was one of those highly educated individuals who undertook anthropological work secondary to their main line of work. His anthropological activities included all those things modern anthropologists do. He observed and documented Aboriginal people and their activities and he lectured and published on the topic. He also held a relevant postgraduate qualification. The major difference was that Basedow did not have a paid position in the field. In the first decades of the twentieth century, jobs for anthropologists were rare, so this is not surprising. We have already considered his qualifications and some aspects of his work, so let us now look at how he undertook his anthropology.



Plates 12.3a–c Aboriginal artefacts collected by Herbert Basedow.

Knife, northern Central Australia, probably collected 1920–24; fishing net from Arnhem Land, probably collected 1928; headband from the Northern Territory, possibly collected 1905.

Source: Photographs by Lannon Harley. National Museum of Australia, Canberra, nma.img-ci20082084-012-wm-vs1 and nma.img-ci20082084-029-wm-vs1.

Most of Basedow's fieldwork was a secondary activity of his many expeditions and shorter trips—that is, his anthropology was done on top of the duties, mainly to do with geology, he was expected to undertake. As he was continually on the move, it was unusual for him to spend more than one or two nights in any one place. This in large part accounts for the often superficial nature of his records. He could not observe extended activities, such as complete ceremonial activities, and much of his observation was serendipitous—that is, he was only able to witness what was happening at the time of his visits.

Basedow's first known venture into anthropology occurred on the 1903 expedition. Expedition leader, Larry Wells, 'kindly permitted [him] to make use of [his] spare time by studying the natural history of the region and collecting what specimens opportunity afforded' (Basedow 1915: 60).

Presumably, anthropology came under the heading 'natural history' and Basedow made extensive records about Aboriginal people. After his return to Adelaide, he presented papers based on his anthropological and geological observations to meetings of the Royal Society of South Australia and the University of Adelaide Scientific Society. He published these and one other article in the following five years and the illustrated ones used his photographs and drawings (Basedow 1904, 1905, 1906, 1908). The first of these was his 'Anthropological notes' and the last was a vocabulary of Aluridja and Arrernte, published in Germany while he was studying there. The other two papers were geological in nature and for one he was awarded the University of Adelaide's Tate Memorial Medal,²⁷ presented for original work in geology. There were only two candidates and Sir Edgeworth David, the examiner, recommended the medal go to Basedow for his 'Geological report on the country traversed by the South Australian Government north-west prospecting expedition, 1903' (Basedow 1905; see Kaus 2008: 19). On this expedition, Basedow made geological, zoological and botanical collections, and he probably collected Aboriginal artefacts as well. As yet, none of the many Central Australian artefacts in his collections can be associated with this expedition. The drawings of 10 artefacts illustrating his 'Anthropological notes' are of such detail that suggest they were drawn from 'life' after he returned to Adelaide (Basedow 1904: Plates III, IV).

Broadly speaking, this was a pattern that he was to follow on the several subsequent expeditions with which he was involved, until a trip to Arnhem Land in 1928. That is, on these trips he would make observations of Aboriginal people and natural history and collect artefacts and specimens as an aside to the chief purpose or purposes of the expedition. After returning home, he would publish on his findings (see below regarding the 1926 and 1928 expeditions) and he would give lectures to learned societies. Eventually, he would also give public lectures; these were well attended and it was not uncommon for prominent people such as the state governor to chair them.

27 See Basedow (1990: 108) for photographs of this medal.

Like many others, Basedow used photography as part of his record-making, and it was usual for him to use more than one camera. On the 1903 expedition, for example, he used two Kodak cameras, a No. 2 pocket folding and a No. 1 panorama (Basedow 1915: 240). Many of his published works include photographs and it was his preference to use his own images. While some publications include a handful of photographs by others, his 1907 'Anthropological notes' is an exception in that all of its 17 photographs were taken by others: Paul Foelsche, N. Holtze and W. Holtze (Basedow 1907: 59)—Nicholas and, presumably, Wladimir Holtze). The numerous drawings, however, are his. Basedow was a capable artist and, again, he provided the drawings reproduced in his publications.

By 1919, Basedow started using additional forms of recording equipment. The 1919 expedition is his first known use of a cinematograph, to take moving pictures. Shortly after, possibly in 1920 in the Alice Springs area, he began to record ritual songs using a wax cylinder recorder. Only a little is known about either. None of his moving footage has apparently survived and, for the cylinders, little beyond the 'tribe' (mostly Arrernte and Kaytetye) of the singers and the subject of the songs is known. Several of the songs are 'inside' or secret, and, until they have been played to the appropriate Traditional Owners, it will not be known if they are all restricted.

There is one other aspect to Basedow's work: the promotion of his work, and himself, through newspapers. This took different forms and seems to have begun by providing expedition photographs for reproduction, starting with the 1903 expedition and continuing until his 1928 Arnhem Land expedition. By the time of the 1905 expedition, Basedow was being interviewed both before and after expeditions. His appearance in the media was not restricted to expedition-related matters; there was also extensive coverage of other aspects of his life, including his education in Germany and his later political activity.

Today, material collected by Basedow is to be found in repositories mainly in Australia, but also in several overseas collections. The Australian collections comprise 1,300 Aboriginal artefacts as well as unknown numbers of geological, zoological and botanical specimens. The National Museum of Australia in Canberra houses the bulk of his anthropological material, almost 80 per cent of his Indigenous artefacts and most of his recordings and photographic negatives and slides. The state museums in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney hold smaller parts of his artefact

collection, and other photographs (including albums and prints) and papers are in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the South Australian Museum Archives and the State Library of South Australia. The full extent of Basedow's collections and the complexities surrounding their generally poor level of documentation and the reasons for their distribution are the subject of ongoing work, along with work on improving the collection's documentation.²⁸

Plant specimens collected in 1919 link Basedow's anthropology and botany. Labels in his hand with some of the specimens record Aboriginal names for plants and sometimes their uses. This did not happen consistently, either on this expedition or in his later plant collecting, but, for those that do have labels, this is an important source of information.

It would seem one rationale for Basedow's collection of artefacts was tied in with his firm belief that Aboriginal people were doomed to become extinct. This is an often-repeated theme with Basedow and, in terms of artefacts, he stated: 'Bones, stone artefacts, and wooden implements will remain in our museums for ever, but the habits, laws, beliefs, and legends are doomed to rapid extinction' (Basedow 1929a: xiii).

Basedow continued to espouse this notion of extinction during his trip to England and Europe late in 1931 and into 1932. In fact, he even put a time limit on their extinction—within 12 years! Reports of this reached Australia and were published in the local media.²⁹ Both the *Argus* and *The Advertiser* ran responses from eminent anthropologists on the same day, by Professor Frederic Wood Jones and Norman B. Tindale, respectively. Jones was reported as being 'surprised' at Basedow's 'unduly pessimistic' prediction.

Thomas (2001: 15–16), in his discussion of Aboriginal health, pointed out how researchers claimed in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century that Indigenous Australians 'might become extinct and their potential contribution to science lost'. He goes on to refer to Russell McGregor's statement that sometimes the same people also campaigned against frontier violence and the bad treatment of Aboriginal

28 For a discussion on work undertaken to date on the photographs, see Kaus (2008: 28–30). It should be noted that Basedow collected some Aboriginal remains in addition to the material discussed here.

29 For example, *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 23 December 1931; *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 23 December 1931.

people (McGregor 1977, cited in Thomas 2001: 16). As we have seen, Thomas could be talking about Basedow. That Basedow probably believed the extinction of Aboriginal people would be a loss to science is inferred in the following quote taken from the preface to *The Australian Aboriginal*: ‘I could not allow this opportunity to pass without brief reference to the causes of the early extinction which is threatening this inoffensive, useful, and scientifically important people’ (Basedow 1929a: xiv).

Later anthropologists have frequently referred to Basedow’s observations. As they often noted, his observations were made at an early time and this makes them important, despite their often limited scope. The nature of the expeditions in which he took part meant he rarely spent much time at any one place, unlike later anthropologists, who tended to spend extended periods in one place. This is reflected in Yengoyan’s summary of previous work with Pitjantjatjara people prior to his own fieldwork, in 1966–67, where he commented: ‘Furthermore, the Pitjandjara are known to the Social Anthropology of the Australian Aboriginal through the early observations of Basedow and more definitive accounts of Elkin, Berndt, Tindale and Mountford’ (Yengoyan 1970: 71).

Presenting information

Basedow had intended to ‘write a progressive series of treatises on the Australian aboriginal, embodying observations as they were being made’ (1929a: vii). In reality, he achieved this until 1914, since he published articles on anthropology following the two major expeditions in 1903 and 1905, a series of trips to the Flinders Ranges between 1905 and about 1913 and a relatively short trip to Melville and Bathurst islands in 1911 (Basedow 1904, 1905, 1908, 1913a, 1913b, 1914). Between 1914 and his next major trip, in 1916,³⁰ to the western Kimberley, he published his journal for the 1903 expedition (Basedow 1915); he also published his 1916 expedition journal (Basedow 1918). Both journals include anthropological material, but Basedow would not publish any further articles of an anthropological nature until 1925. There were geological papers and some newspaper articles, however, as well as the four reports following his 1919–20 medical relief expeditions.

30 There may have been an expedition to Central Australia about 1914, but nothing concrete has been found about this.

Perhaps Basedow decided that it would be better to embody his anthropological observations in a more substantial form. It is also likely that the six years following 1918 were busy ones for him, with expeditions every year except 1921. In 1924, he also stood for parliament, which would have been another call on his time. For at least part of this period, he would also write his first book, *The Australian Aboriginal*, a 405-page tome published in 1925 (reprinted in 1929). It is a scholarly work, encyclopedic in approach, which covers every aspect of the lives of Aboriginal people from birth to death, with chapters on topics including art, music, religious life, origins and several on physical anthropology. It embodies his own observations along with information from areas that he never visited. It reflects his wide knowledge but it lacks the referencing of the work of others. He wanted 'to make it of general interest' (Basedow 1929a: ix), at a time when an overview of Australian Aboriginal people and their cultures was not really available to the general public. It was still a scholarly book, although its lack of referencing is something to be deplored. He excused this approach in his preface:

I have to offer an apology to any authors who may claim priority to some of the facts which I mention in this book. I have written this account of the Australian aboriginal without attempting to consult previous literature, for the simple reason that, had I started looking up all necessary references, the volume might never have been completed. (Basedow 1929a: xii)

Basedow continued with his justification, saying that his 'time at headquarters' had been 'so limited' during the previous 15 years that it was 'impossible for [him] to adopt any other method than to write up [his] observations at first-hand and run the risk of a certain amount of trespass' (Basedow 1929a: xii). In the final piece of this justification, he effectively lets himself off the hook, saying:

Our knowledge of Australian ethnology is so meagre that every man who has had first-hand experience among the tribes should consider it his bounden duty to place on record any facts he possesses, however trivial they may be. Every year the number of people who have seen the unsophisticated savage is dwindling. (Basedow 1929a: xiii)

Mention should also be made of *Knights of the Boomerang*, Basedow's second book, published in 1935, two years after his death. This book was more of a narrative and is told from an 'Aboriginal perspective'. The Berndts (Berndt and Berndt 1981: 539) found it to be a popular affair and 'less careful with both "facts" and interpretation', while McCarthy

(1935: 22), in his review of the book, stated it to be ‘reliable’ and seemed pleased that it was ‘at a price within the reach of everybody’. Nonetheless, it suffers from irregularities this author believes are not down to Basedow, particularly a number of incorrectly captioned photographs and what appears to be an abrupt ending, as if someone took the manuscript and decided not to publish the final chapters (see Kaus 1984).

The point was made above about Basedow being unable to spend much time at any one place and how this affected what he was able to observe and record. In *Knights of the Boomerang*, he dealt with this by amalgamating observations from different times:

The observations which have been pieced together in this volume have been made at different times, in different localities, and under different conditions; but I have taken the liberty of bringing them into chapters in order to make them read in sequence. (Basedow 1935: 17–18)

This unusual approach needs to be considered when reading this book; however, it is particularly useful for those interested in Basedow’s work, as its narrative form fills out some of the bare details that we would otherwise be left with. It would help to have a basic understanding of Basedow’s travels to place what he says into cultural, geographical and chronological contexts.

Linguistic capabilities

Both English and German were spoken at home as Basedow was growing up. His two stints in Germany, in 1890–93 and 1907–10, no doubt contributed to his competency in his parents’ native tongue. In a curriculum vitae in Basedow’s hand, he stated (probably understated): ‘I possess a fair knowledge of the German and French languages.’³¹ It is unlikely his work as an anatomy assistant while in Germany could have been undertaken unless he was a competent German speaker. Basedow was also fluent, according to one newspaper, in Italian, Spanish and Danish and had a ‘fair knowledge of the various Slavonic dialects’.³² He also had capabilities in at least two Aboriginal languages, Arrernte and Aluridja. One can imagine Basedow, Unndela and Tjikana conversing in these languages at home.

31 Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS Set 161/5 Box 3(11), Folder 5/4.

32 *Muswellbrook Chronicle*, 16 May 1933: 4.

His competency in speaking Aluridja would come in useful when the Mackay expedition of 1926 encountered Aboriginal people in the country between Charlotte Waters, Docker River and Oodnadatta. For example, the day after leaving Ernabella, in the Musgrave Ranges, heading towards Oodnadatta, the expedition came across some people camped at a waterhole. Basedow was able to find out that the older people remembered Immalangenna, an old man he had met on the 1903 expedition.³³



Plate 12.4 On his expeditions, Basedow travelled by buggy, wagon, horse, car and camel. This is the 1926 expedition photographed at an unknown location between Charlotte Waters and the Petermann Ranges, Northern Territory.

Photograph: Herbert Basedow, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 1985.60.3935.

An indication of Basedow's competency in Arrernte comes from T. G. H. Strehlow when discussing execution for sacrilegious acts.³⁴ Basedow related a song in connection with this with sufficient accuracy that Strehlow (1970: 137) was able to identify the place with which the ceremony Basedow witnessed was associated. Basedow did not provide this information.

33 Mitchell Library, MSS Set 161/5 Item 17, 29 July 1926.

34 Because this relates to secret totemic activity, this description is necessarily brief and general.

It is difficult to fathom Tindale's comment in relation to Basedow's linguistic ability in the 'Blunders' chapter of his *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* (1974). Tindale said that Basedow was 'often far from the mark in transcriptions'. By way of example, Tindale (1974: 155) said that Basedow's 'most notable blunder probably was Herrinda for the well-known tribal term Aranda'. Given Basedow's linguistic background, one would expect him to have a reasonable if not high level of linguistic competency, but, for Aboriginal languages, this would require the expertise of a linguist to properly assess. Nevertheless, Tindale was wrong, as Basedow did not use 'Herrinda' in place of Aranda (Arrernte). He first used this term in his 1908 vocabularies publication where he actually stated 'Herrinda' to be a local group of Arrernte (Basedow 1908: 208).³⁵ This was the country of Arrerika (aka Punch), who had been an expedition assistant on at least two major expeditions with which Basedow had been involved, in 1903 and 1920. Most likely, Arrerika was Basedow's only informant for the Arrernte (Basedow = Arrunndta) part of his vocabulary of Aluridja and Arrernte (Basedow 1908). It is also likely that Arrerika enabled Basedow to witness a secret emu ceremony in the eastern MacDonnell Ranges, probably in 1920. In his account of this, Basedow (1935: 152) again used the term 'Herrinda', the name for the 'local groups of the Arrunndta' in the area where he was camped at the time.

Summary

Basedow's employment and related opportunities were generally not directly associated with anthropology. They were mainly geology-related and his recording of Aboriginal cultures was undertaken secondary to this. Even so, he was to make substantial records of Aboriginal cultures, resulting in several publications, numerous photographs depicting Aboriginal people in the first three decades of the twentieth century and a large collection of artefacts. He was a man of many talents, with a career in medicine and geology and with a deep interest in natural history. He published in these areas and he also made important collections of plant and geological specimens as well as some animal (both vertebrate and invertebrate) specimens. Overall, his contribution to anthropology, geology, botany and zoology was substantial but, as Ian Harmstorf (2015),

35 I would like to thank Anna Kelly for translating for me this part of Basedow's article, which is in German.

his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* biographer, stated: 'It was frequently said of him, after his early death, that he would have achieved greater eminence if he had not spread his remarkable talents so widely.'

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