

## *Found in Translation: Many Meanings on a North Australian Mission*

by Laura Rademaker

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Since 1788, missionaries have been at once evangelists, wardens, translators, friends and enemies of Aboriginal people. They have been both agents for and foes of the colonial state. Yet, as with colonialism, missions have changed through time, adapted to new ideologies, responded to theological changes and negotiated with changing Aboriginal communities. To tackle these histories, particularly from inside the colonial state, requires great maturity. Scholars must have a deep sense of the specificity of Aboriginal culture and language and relationship to place, as well as a good grasp of the particular theology and politics of the chosen denomination. Those who enter these labyrinthine archives must be alert to the disciplines relevant to such a study: linguistics, anthropology and theology as well as the historical sub-disciplines of Australian and mission history. Then there is the complex subjectivity of writing Christian histories from the pugnacious secularism of contemporary Australia. Nearly all historians of mission in Australia live day by day with the legacies of colonialism and Christianity. Rademaker tackles this head-on in her finely crafted introduction where she describes her upbringing as an Evangelical Anglican in the Sydney diocese.

The opening chapter identifies a major new voice in mission history. Rademaker's mature and very well researched analysis of the history of mission in nineteenth-century colonial Australia is both insightful and comprehensive. She is right to position this history within the broader context of missions to the Pacific Islands as Sydney became the hub for these networks. In churches and manses in these streets,

missionaries debated the questions of translation, the problems of interpretation and the successes and failures of their endeavours. Rademaker has brought this history to life with a sure and confident touch rare in such a young scholar.

The book is focused on the Church Missionary Society Angurugu mission on Groote Eylandt that began in 1944. Over six chapters, Rademaker examines the issues of translation and language through both the archives and participant memories of the messy encounters of mission life. While combining interviews with archival analysis is not especially unusual, Rademaker has used her research to explore the very sounds and experience of this past; to examine the transformative effect of translation, hymn singing and letter writing on the mission. The result is a history that hovers between speaker and listener; that calls to mind the resistance of the interlocutor as well as the confusion of the speaker. These chapters bring to life the inward emotions and outward practice of mission and are identified in their titles: 'Ears to hear: The sounds of speech'; 'The letter kills: Writing in English'; 'Speaking to the heart: The language of faith'; 'Singing in tongues: Translation through song'.

At first, communication on this mission was meant to be in English. This was settler-colonial Australia at the height of assimilation. Aboriginal languages were suppressed or denied while the polyglotism of Aboriginal people was exploited to reshape them as English speakers. Missionaries did not make any attempt, at first, to learn Anindilyakwa, and Rademaker uncovered an unexpected outcome: the people gladly hid their language and therefore maintained the secrets, the power and the hierarchies of knowledge implicit in its use. Through language, people could undermine missionary aims, offer resistance and hold secret conversations within earshot of their uncomprehending mission masters. And English was compromised. Missionaries were compelled to recognise the krio of northern Australia – the *plower* (flour) and *juka* (sugar) in use at the shop. The languages of this mission were in flux and contingent.

This changed in the 1960s as fresh ideas challenged the assimilation theories of earlier decades and allowed new space for Aboriginal languages. Missionaries were now urged to learn Anindilyakwa and to speak to the people directly 'to the heart'. They met resistance from the community, for the status quo had served them well. And the timing was complex: fluency in English was especially important to Indigenous people for negotiating with mining companies seeking access to resources. The missionary linguist Stokes had long dreamed of completing the work of Bible translation and the use of Anindilyakwa by all mission residents. Now free to undertake her work, she tried her best to interest both European and Aboriginal people in the task, but struggled beyond the key figures of Gula Lalara and Murabuda.

Rademaker illuminates the cultural differences on the origins of language by exploring the myths relevant to both Christians and the Anindilyakwa people. Her story is bookended with the Old Testament story of Babel, the time when the peoples of the world spoke one language and sought to build a tower to heaven. God thwarted this dangerous ambition by scattering his people across the earth and making them incomprehensible to each other. Thus was born the clamour and confusion of languages. Translation into the vernacular was a bedrock of Protestant faith. Success was proof of God's presence in all humanity. But the language of the Anindilyakwa-speaking people was not just a medium to convey the divinity of Christianity, it had been carried to them by their ancestral Creative Being Yandarrnga and his sons and was of deep ontological significance. These were communities created and re-created by their speech, their texts and their songs. In this sense, the missionaries were right, it was a 'heart language'.

This book explores the deep paradox at the heart of Christian mission; translating the universalism of the Christian God while acknowledging the cultural relativism of distinct languages. Nineteenth-century missionaries were often sensitive to this, but it was forgotten for much of the twentieth century under the power relations of settler colonialism and the hegemony of English. Rademaker brings her wide reading and deep knowledge to produce a significant contribution to Aboriginal history and the analysis of mission. This is an important book and a true cross-cultural study.

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