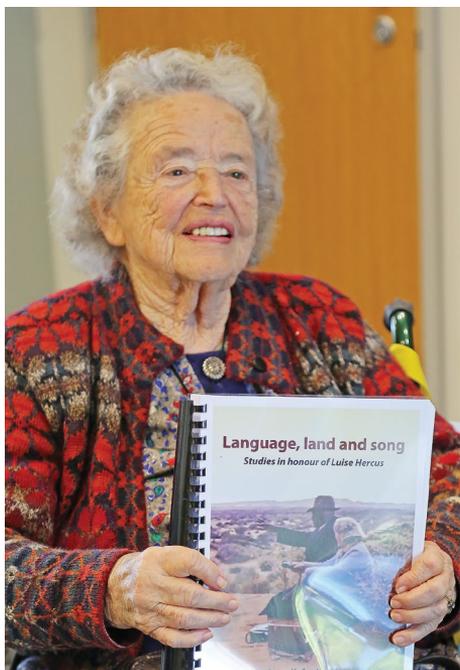


## Luise Hercus AM, FAHA 1926–2018

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Harold Koch with contributions from members of the Editorial Board of Aboriginal History Inc.<sup>1</sup>



Luise Hercus at the launch of *Language, Land and Song: Studies in Honour of Luise Hercus* in 2016.

Source: Grace Koch.

Luise Anna Schwarzschild was born 16 January 1926 in Munich, Germany, to her artist father, Alfred, and pianist mother, Theodora (née Luttner). The family's secure, middle-class existence was disrupted by the rise of Nazism, given her father's Jewish background and the political dissent of her mother's family. In 1938, the family fled to England, where Luise learned English and pursued her education. In 1943, she gained a scholarship to St Anne's College, University of Oxford, where she was awarded first-class honours in Romance languages, specialising in medieval French, then held a lectureship in Romance languages for seven years. She extended her studies to Sanskrit and Middle Indo-Aryan Prakrit dialects.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this tribute was originally published by Harold Koch: 'Luise Hercus AM, FAHA 1926–2018', *Emeritus: The Australian National University Emeritus Faculty e-magazine* 9(4): 7–8, 192.55.98.146/\_resources/ef/news/Emeritus%20Vol%2009%20No%2004%20-%20May%202018.pdf (accessed 18 December 2018).

In 1955, she married the Australian physicist Graham Hercus and moved to Melbourne, where their son Iain was born in 1957. From 1955 to 1969, Luise taught Sanskrit unofficially at the University of Melbourne and Monash University. From the early 1960s, on her own initiative, she sought out Aboriginal people in Victoria who retained knowledge of their languages and documented these as far as possible. After extensive travels in Victoria and adjacent areas of New South Wales, on a minimal budget, she produced her results in *The Languages of Victoria: A Late Survey* (1969, revised 1986), contradicting the widely held view that the Aboriginal languages of the south-east had not survived.

Luise's linguistic documentation continued, extending to Paakantyi on the Darling River in New South Wales; Nukunu, Wirangu, Adnyamathanha, Kuyani, and Arabana-Wangkangurru in South Australia; and a small number of languages of south-western Queensland and the Northern Territory. From 1965 to 1969, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies appointed her as a part-time research fellow attached to the Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide, where T.G.H. Strehlow pursued Australian linguistics.

In 1969, she was appointed Senior Lecturer in what later became the Faculty of Asian Studies at The Australian National University, to teach Sanskrit. She commuted weekly from Melbourne, where Graham was employed, to be Deputy Warden in Burton Hall during the week. In 1973, she was promoted to Reader, a position she held until her retirement in 1991.

In 1974, after the premature death of her husband, she moved to the Canberra region, purchasing a farm near Gundaroo, where she could indulge her well-known love of animals, in particular wombats and large dogs.

Luise received a PhD from The Australian National University in 1976 for published work submitted as a thesis titled *Studies in Middle Indo-Iranian and Aboriginal Languages*.

On her retirement, from 1992 until 2018, she was attached as a Visiting Fellow in The Australian National University Linguistics Department.

Luise's involvement with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) endured for most of its history, from the early 1960s – as a member of the institute and its Linguistics Advisory Committee, recipient of research grants, and especially as the depositor of one of the largest collections of audio recordings, over 1,000 hours covering 56 language varieties.

Luise's research into Aboriginal languages and histories continued throughout the period of her employment in Asian Studies. She produced grammars and dictionaries for a number of languages. Her main research focus, however, came to be the languages and traditions of the Lake Eyre Basin. She devoted the bulk

of her time until the end of her life to producing monograph-length accounts of Wangkangurru traditions – historical stories, song series, Ancestral stories, placename information – communicated to her by the remarkable knowledge-holder Mick Maclean Irinyili. This work established an exceptional body of documentation and translation of stories of places in the region, based on numerous fieldtrips and many interdisciplinary scholarly collaborations.

She was generous in providing information from her vast store of knowledge to members of Aboriginal communities, researchers and consultants in ecology, archaeology, Indigenous heritage, native title, land rights and land management, education, and government policy. Her documentation of languages continues to be used in language revitalisation programs by Aboriginal communities, many of whose members Luise maintained long-term contacts with and counted among her dear friends.

Luise was a founding member of the interdisciplinary editorial board of *Aboriginal History* journal from its inception in 1977, providing linguistic expertise. She edited three volumes of the journal (1985, 1991 and 1999). In the first of these, she states her position on the role of language studies: ‘a mere translation is not enough: the text with the gloss is, after all, the closest we can get to what people said and thought’.<sup>2</sup> Luise also published nine articles in the journal, one in volume 1, 1977, called ‘Tales of Dadu-Dagaḷi Rib-bone Billy’, a characteristically presented story framed by an Aboriginal historian and recounted direct in Aboriginal language, an ‘eye witness account’ as Luise called them,<sup>3</sup> translated to make them accessible for all. Such stories were otherwise only published in specialised linguistics journals. Aboriginal History Inc. has compiled an electronic republication of the nine articles Luise published in *Aboriginal History*, with an introduction by linguist Peter Sutton. These, together with an eight-page bibliography of Luise’s published works prepared by Harold Koch, will be available on our website at [aboriginalhistory.org.au](http://aboriginalhistory.org.au), and Peter Sutton’s review is published in this volume 42.

Luise was also the *Aboriginal History* book review editor from 1993 to 2017. She had a knack for choosing reviewers with expertise who would deliver their review, and was remarkably persistent in extracting them, keeping a permanent ‘black list’ of those who failed to produce. She co-edited a series of books published by Aboriginal History Inc., including studies of Indigenous placenames,<sup>4</sup> regional Ancestral stories<sup>5</sup> and an important collection of South Australian Aboriginal biographies.<sup>6</sup>

2 Dutton and Hercus 1985: 3.

3 Dutton and Hercus 1985: 3.

4 Clark et al. 2014; Koch and Hercus 2009. Also Hercus et al. 2002.

5 Beckett and Hercus 2009.

6 Simpson and Hercus 1998.

Luise's research in the Aboriginal studies field made a huge and continuing impact on the recognition and preservation of Indigenous historical knowledge. Her work has been recognised with many honours: election to the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1978); membership in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1995, 'for service to education and linguistics, particularly through the preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture'; award of a Centenary of Federation Medal (2003); compilation of her articles on Indo-Aryan languages (1991) and of volumes of essays by colleagues in Aboriginal studies, in 1990 and in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Luise passed away 15 April 2018 after a brief illness. She is survived by her son Iain and daughter-in-law Anne-Mari, a sister Dora in New Zealand, and eight nieces and nephews. She is sorely missed as an outstanding member of the *Aboriginal History* board, inspirational colleague, role model and friend.

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7 Austin, Koch and Simpson 2016, 2018.

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