

# Luise Hercus and *Aboriginal History*

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## Introduction

Between 1977 and 1999, Luise Hercus published nine papers in the journal *Aboriginal History*.<sup>1</sup> Seven of these were centred on narrative and song texts recorded in or about the Lake Eyre region, presented in the Aboriginal languages of Luise's teachers, and carefully glossed and translated into English prose. The other two *Aboriginal History* papers were salvage studies dealing with languages of far south-western New South Wales, using old records.

## The oral histories

Luise's method in the seven *Aboriginal History* text-based papers led to the Aboriginal people with whom she had worked giving their histories from within their own world and in their own voices. Luise provided plentiful historical and biographical context, but the centrepieces were always the narratives themselves, and the central characters were the narrators and those they spoke about.

Although Luise was trained in linguistic studies at Oxford, hers was an approach far more at home in the Boasian textual tradition than in that of British philology. Far from merely scouring the outback for grammars of unwritten languages, Luise's interests extended to every aspect of the people's lives and historical experiences, including both the unutterably tragic and the comic. Like her language teachers of the bush, Luise largely let the facts speak for themselves. Her own role needed no

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<sup>1</sup> Hercus 1977, 1980, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1989; Hercus and Koch 1996, 1999; Austin et al. 1988. All papers were republished by ANU E Press in 2011, and DOI numbers are derived with the 2011 date.

moral meta-commentary in order to bolster its authority. It may not be surprising that it was Luise who came up with the unadorned title for our book: *This is What Happened*.<sup>2</sup>

## Aboriginal history from the other side

In 1981, Henry Reynolds published his ground-breaking book *The Other Side of the Frontier: An Interpretation of the Aboriginal Response to the Invasion and Settlement of Australia* (1981). The next year it was republished with a new subtitle: *Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (1982). While this book indeed focused on the experiences of Indigenous people during conquest and colonisation, it did so primarily through the use of documents and publications written by Europeans. The voices of Aboriginal people themselves were largely silent.

This was a pity, given that the journal *Aboriginal History* had been in print since 1977 and in a paper in the very first issue – a paper listed by Reynolds but not discussed – Luise Hercus had published texts in local languages concerning the frontier period and the life and times of the ‘koonki’ (witch doctor) known as Rib-Bone Billy or Ngadu-dhagalhi.<sup>3</sup> What is more, she had said there: ‘This is Aboriginal history viewed from “the other side” by the koonki’s own distant relatives, speakers of Wangganguru’.<sup>4</sup>

The first of these stories gave details of a massacre of Aboriginal people by ‘white-fellows’, probably in the Clifton Hills area of north-east South Australia and probably in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> Like most such Aboriginal tales of frontier terrorism that were told by people who lived at about the same time or not long after, the narrative is focused on the people, and on the events and their locations, but makes no moral or political comment and reveals little of the emotions of the storyteller. The only point at which the narrator, Ben Murray, makes such a remark of feeling, is towards the end when he says:

*Guldjirigarinha birda – ga warduguba njurdu ngamarlaburrunha*.<sup>6</sup>  
They shot them all, even the pitiful little babies.<sup>7</sup>

2 Hercus and Sutton 1986.

3 Reynolds 1982: 244. I have changed Luise’s original spelling that used diacritics (Dadu-ḍagalī) to the practical orthography shown here.

4 Hercus 1977: 55.

5 Hercus 1977: 56.

6 I have omitted here the morpheme-by-morpheme glosses of the original text.

7 Hercus 1977: 60, 62. *Ngamarla* means ‘pity’.

In her second *Aboriginal History* paper, ‘How we danced the Mudlungga’, Luise presented texts in which Mick McLean and Ben Murray gave quite detailed memoirs of participation in the Mudlungga ceremony in 1901 and 1902.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the usual view from the other side of the frontier – the European side – these histories are not couched in terms of unnamed ‘blacks’ having unspecified ‘corroborees’, but are presented in terms of identified participants, site by site details of the cross-country progress of the ceremonial postulants and their families, and even remembered song verses specific to the Mudlungga are interpolated here and there. Luise’s detailed annotations in this paper added considerably to our understanding of frontier-period travelling ceremonies of this kind.<sup>9</sup>

## Afghan cameleers and Syrian traders

In recent decades there has been a burgeoning literature on the so-called Afghan cameleers of the Australian outback in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and on their relationships with non-Afghans, including Aboriginal people and Syrian traders.<sup>10</sup> In terms of the latter relationships as a scholarly interest, Luise was, I think, there first.

Her third *Aboriginal History* paper, ‘Afghan stories from the north-east of South Australia’, contained narratives by Mona Merrick and her brother Arthur Warren in Arabana, and by Ben Murray and Johnny Reece in Wangganguru.<sup>11</sup> Typically, the tales are sprinkled with specific placenames and identified Aboriginal individuals, but, as well, the ‘Afghans’ (and Syrians) are in many cases identified by personal name: Mūsā, Salim Khan, Sher Khan, Azim Khan, Abdul Qadir, Wasīm Khan, Sayyid Ali, Bejah Dervish, Azim Amīr, Mansūr. These are invaluable records of frontier characters, many of whom would otherwise have left little trace in documentary history.<sup>12</sup>

Luise, as a co-author with Peter Austin and Philip Jones, returned to the Afghan theme in ‘Ben Murray (Parlku-nguyu-thangkayiwarna)’.<sup>13</sup> At 73 pages, this was the giant among her *Aboriginal History* papers, and more than half of those pages consisted of narratives by Ben Murray with glosses and translations. He would have made a good fourth (and first) author in the byline.

8 Hercus 1980.

9 Mulvaney (1976) surveyed the literature including the multiple sources on the spread of the Molonga (Mudlungga) ceremony 1893–1918.

10 See, for example, Cigler 1986; Stevens 1989; Rajkowski 2005; Jones and Kenny 2007.

11 Hercus 1981.

12 Basic biographical details of most of the men in the above list may be found in Jones and Kenny 2007: 167–91.

13 Austin et al. 1988.

## A distinctive structure

The narrative texts are dealt with by Luise on a pattern: the original text is transcribed, then glossed morpheme-by-morpheme, and then the free translation appears next. This means that the reader can be assured that Luise actually understands the grammar and semantics of the languages of her teachers. Alongside all this is usually a phoneme chart giving the orthography for the texts, and a list of grammatical abbreviations used in the glosses. And at the end, there is always a list of references to Luise's sources.<sup>14</sup>

Several of the *Aboriginal History* papers, like most of her Australianist books and many of her other papers, begin with photographs of Aboriginal people, usually the narrators in the case of a paper based on texts, or speakers of the language in the case of the grammars. In these cases, the mentor precedes the student.

In many of her papers and books, Luise also supplies brief biographies of these people, and provides the historical contexts of their lives or the times they speak about.

A recurring graphic is the regional map, and another is a map of language countries, accompanied, often, by a more detailed map of particular locations referred to in the text, and one or more photographs of sites visited by Luise and her guides.

## Collaborative work

These maps reflect Luise's passion for recording not just stories and songs about places, but their actual locations. Without the off-road vehicle, this work would have been severely curtailed.<sup>15</sup> Luise was guided and mentored in this cultural landscape mapping by her language teachers, who were very many in number but foremost among whom was Mick McLean Irinyili (c. 1888–1977). Irinyili and his family had left the Simpson Desert for good in 1899, but his memories were rich, and with the aid of Dennis Bartell, who was able to locate the wells visited by explorer David Lindsay in 1886, Luise was able to tie those memories to precise points in a daunting landscape.<sup>16</sup>

Non-Aboriginal colleagues and friends also worked in the bush with Luise. They provided help with mapping site locations, with tape recording, cooking and transport. Her husband Grahame was a key person on the earlier bush trips, and also took photographs. Over quite a few years, Luise had the benefit of the

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14 Perhaps the most intriguing of these is the last reference for the last of the *Aboriginal History* papers. It reads: 'Strehlow, 1947. *NBmissing [sic]: if not supplied, delete reference and quotation sourced from him?*' And indeed that must have happened, as this ghostly allusion to T.G.H. Strehlow has no echo in the text.

15 Sutton 2016.

16 Hercus 1985.

repeated company of Vlad Potezny, whose navigational and mapping skills were superb. She also worked and/or travelled in these remote locations with Iain Hercus, Cath Ellis, Sally White, Rhonda Buckley, Lynda Penny, Bob Ellis, Peter Austin, Isabel McBryde, Colin and Pam MacDonald, Richard Barz and family, Peter Clark, Dennis Bartell, Philip Jones, Stephen Morey, Des Coulthard, myself, and others.

Luise also collaborated with other scholars and published with them repeatedly, perhaps her most frequent collaborator in her later decades being Grace Koch, who was able to bring her great musicological skills to coincide with Luise's linguistic transcriptions of songs.<sup>17</sup> Luise had earlier worked in the field with musicologist Catherine Ellis and others in 1965, 1966 and 1967,<sup>18</sup> and a limited release report on women's music of the eastern Western Desert resulted, co-authored by members of the field teams.<sup>19</sup>

Many scholars in the humanities and social sciences publish alone, unlike those in the hard sciences. Luise's approach to scholarship was as a member of a collegial community where sharing, rather than hoarding or solo display, was a driving principle.

The book of oral history texts and their translations that Luise and I put together in the early 1980s contained 33 stories from all over Australia, and was structured exactly along the line of Luise's own *Aboriginal History* papers and others she published elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> One difference from Luise's *Aboriginal History* papers was that, in the book, the narrators' names appeared in the credits, and were placed ahead of those of the translators and annotators. This was a refinement in the art of recognition.

## The linguistic papers

In 'The Marawara language of Yelta', Luise used the case of the Marawara language to build a commentary on the methodological problem of interpreting old linguistic records of varying quality and often small quantity. 'But we are tempted to ask for too much from some of these sources, particularly the word-lists ...'.<sup>21</sup> Yet, in this case, by using the only major work on Marawara<sup>22</sup> and her much greater knowledge of neighbouring dialects of the same language (called by her Paakantji or Baagandji), Luise was able to make reliable sense of the nineteenth-century sources. The 1939 source was, as she remarked elsewhere, 'a fine work by Tindale' (who was

17 See Hercus and Koch 1996, 1999.

18 Ellis and Barwick 1989: 23–24.

19 Buckley et al. 1967, 1968.

20 Hercus and Sutton 1986.

21 Hercus 1984: 56.

22 Tindale 1939.

a museum ethnologist), and she considered that ‘Tindale’s hearing of what to him was an unknown language was brilliant’.<sup>23</sup> Appreciative collegial recognition was one of Luise’s scholarly hallmarks. She praised Tindale’s ear for language when few if any other professional linguists had seen fit to do so. Just before she died, Luise proposed that she and I edit, annotate and publish (under his name) Norman Tindale’s manuscript grammar of Wanyiwalku that he wrote when working with George Dutton.<sup>24</sup> Having worked together with Luise on so many projects over the decades since at least 1981, this would have been a highly enjoyable process, but it was not to be.

In the second of the linguistic papers Luise published in *Aboriginal History* (1989), she again found time to praise the work of Norman Tindale:

The only comparative word-lists that are truly satisfactory are those which are based on a depth study of both languages involved. There are rare exceptions even when there is no depth study. These exceptions are made with the help of two speakers in the same environment, preferably knowing each other’s language ... A fine example of such a list is Tindale’s manuscript of a comparative vocabulary of Marawara, the southernmost Paakantji dialect, and Yuyu (Ngintait) from the Murray below Ned’s Corner. Tindale made the list with both speakers present, Frank Fletcher for Marawara and Bob McKinley for Yuyu ...<sup>25</sup>

Luise’s paper is a masterly unravelling of difficult sources in a part of Australia where primary ethnolinguistic records were sparse and fragmentary. Her task here was in many ways the reuniting of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The paper’s main emphasis was on more accurately locating geographically the linguistic countries of the region and sorting out the naming of groups. As she did so often, here Luise included archaeological considerations, and contributed to our picture of the patterns of distribution of riverine and non-riverine inhabitants of the Murray system at the time of conquest.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

After a scholar is no longer with us, their works remain a living presence alongside our memories of the one who created them. When their work was a joint production, meshing narrator with translator and commentator, the narrators also live on in the present through their tales of the past.

23 Hercus 1982: 3.

24 See N.B. Tindale 1938 – c. 1980, Notes on Wainjiwalku grammar, Adelaide, South Australian Museum Archives AA 338/8/21.

25 Hercus 1989: 52.

26 Hercus 1989: 60–61.

Particularly through her decades-long personal relationships with the families of her Aboriginal teachers, and also partly through frequent repatriation of her records during her involvement in family history projects, language revitalisation, heritage protection and native title research, Luise herself became part of Aboriginal history across a vast area of south-eastern Australia. That history has long been one of intertwined lives, and therefore of the sharing of those we have lost.

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This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 42, 2018*,  
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2018 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.