

# ***Gillen's Modest Record: His Journal of the Spencer-Gillen Anthropological Expedition across Australia, 1901–02***

edited by Philip Jones

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Philip Jones takes the title of this book from Gillen's original title for his account: 'Camp Jottings. A modest record of our doings, day by day'. 'Gillen's Modest Record' was originally written 'to give his wife some idea of his day by day activities', according to his grandson Dr Robert Gillen.<sup>1</sup>

Jones's introduction allows us to understand the main characters. First in significance was Francis (Frank) Gillen who, during his decades of service at the remote Overland Telegraph Stations, Charlotte Waters and Alice Springs, had become accepted by the 'Arunta' as though an initiated man. He persuaded his friend, the brilliant zoologist Professor Baldwin Spencer, whom he first met in 1894, to engage with the 'Arunta' people. As a result they became world-famous anthropologists, and the 'Arunta' the best-known Aboriginal people, following publication of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* in 1899. Gillen's long-time friend Police Trooper Chance accepted the roles as driver of the supply wagon and general camp assistant. And, equally in importance to success, he had 2 Southern 'Arunta' men who joined them at Charlotte Waters, Parunda and Erlikyalikya. They had probably known him for 25 years, and their tasks were as translators, trackers of the horses and general helpers.

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1 Gillen, *Gillen's Diary*, v.

Gillen had left his dear wife, Amelia, and his much-loved children in the town of Moonta in South Australia to go on the journey by horse and buggy. This anthropological expedition was to make use of the remote telegraph stations as bases for contact with local area Aboriginal people from Oodnadatta to Powell Creek, before branching off to Borrooloola on the north coast of Australia.

When I first read the journal I was struck by the ease with which Gillen gives the sense of the living pre-history of the Overland Telegraph Line by his ready use of Aboriginal placenames, often linked to mythological tracks, all along the way. This is complemented by his knowledge of the recent histories of pioneers, many of whom were met during their travels. On a second reading it seemed to me that Gillen had perceived the journey as similar to a Biblical epic.

His humour is also apparent throughout the journal, and as he says: 'I never can write a decent letter without at least exaggerating the truth & my great trouble is to do it in an interesting manner' (p. 148). He comments at their first camp 'Strange to say no mosquitoes, presume the flies have eaten them all up' (p. 5). At Camp 2 there are 'flies! flies! flies! nothing but flies' (p. 6), and by Camp 13:

Up just before daylight but not before the flies. I think of Job & wish that he stood on the banks of this Central Australian river in the month of April & in a good season ... boil plagues any ordinary man might put up with, but flies as they are here would drive a saint to profanity. Three or four hundred million of them camped on our buggies last night, straining the springs to their utmost capacity, & when I awoke & shouted the usual morning greeting: 'How is your liver' to Spencer they charged upon me with a howl of joy that woke old Chance, deaf as he is. (pp. 37–38)

At their first major stop, Charlotte Waters, Spencer introduced the 'Kinematograph', with which he and Gillen made the first-ever ethnographic films of ceremonies in mainland Australia. They also made records of 'corroboree songs' to accompany the films, the first time that such an innovation had been tried in the world (pp. 20–21). These were complemented by a wonderful series of photographs and sketches at all localities along the route.

He is not free from the prejudices of the era, as his language and the names he gives to some Aboriginal people indicate. However, the saving grace is his recognition of each person as a unique individual. Indeed, in my view he is as close as any Australian has been to Chaucer: to paraphrase him, almost every person is 'the best of his or her kind'. Illustrative is his description of a senior man previously unknown to him. He is introduced as 'the gentleman, Ilpalyurkna', who is then described as 'a totem head man of the Unmatjira ---. He is at present a much valued member of our staff, & quite a walking encyclopedia of the lore of his tribe' (p. 160).

Gillen's love of words and languages is evident throughout. He provided anecdotes, humorous or reflective, at either the start or end of the main day's record of activities, that later allowed Gillen to extract the main record of each day and rewrite it for Spencer.

These anthropological records indicated his ability to focus and his remarkable memory. They include the first-ever account of anyone but Aboriginal people following a mythological route, giving the details of the country along which a great snake had travelled (pp. 274–81). They also indicate that in the major ceremonies associated with the great snake, both men and women participated.

The many photographs are excellent and, where they depict Aboriginal people, inevitably show very fit people.

All of the pages are enhanced by Jones's use of footnotes, which illuminate rather than distract, and his indexes of ceremonies, people and so on are also very helpful.

Philip Jones acknowledges the assistance of many people, including researchers and financial supporters. He has, by his editing, created out of Gillen's modest record, a masterpiece of Australian literature.

## Reference

Gillen, R. S. *Gillen's Diary: The Camp Jottings of F.J. Gillen on the Spencer and Gillen Expedition across Australia 1901–1902*. Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1968.

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