Top: T.G.H. Strehlow, 1977

Photograph courtesy of Canberra Times.

Bottom: A.P. Elkin, 1979

Photograph by Colin Roach, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
T.G.H. STREHLOW 1908-1978

It is with deep regret that I record the death of Theodor George Henry Strehlow, which occurred in his old rooms at the University of Adelaide on 3 October 1978, in the presence of some of his friends and his wife. Ted Strehlow was renowned as a specialist in Aboriginal studies, concentrating on the Aranda virtually throughout his life.

Born at Hermannsburg on 6 June 1908, he was fortunate in having as his father the well-known Lutheran missionary, Carl Friederich Theodor Strehlow who wrote Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien (Frankfurt, 1907), and whose death in 1922 is so movingly described in his son's Journey to Horseshoe Bend (1969). Ted Strehlow was deeply influenced by his father's educational background. Carl Strehlow had a great interest in classical literature and Germanic mythology. On coming to Australia (his son records), 'A new and exciting world of the mind had opened up for [him] after he had begun his work of collecting the sacred Western Aranda myths and songs' (T.G.H. Strehlow 1969:5).

Ted Strehlow carried this interest further, as he was able to do because of his training at Immanuel College and the University of Adelaide, in the Classics and in English literature. Like his father, he combined this with his Aranda studies. Speaking Aranda, German and English from early childhood he had the great advantage of being able to live within the area of his major interest, and the even greater advantage of the close friendships he established with Aborigines, to an extent that has been possible to relatively few anthropologists. The culmination of this rapprochement between the classical writing of Europe and the oral literature of the Aranda found its expression in that unique work, Songs of Central Australia (1971), which had been submitted for publication in 1956. Strehlow was a great humanist, with a thoughtful and informed approach to Aboriginal studies. More important, however, were his emotional roots in the culture of the Aranda people themselves. It was his attachment to their traditional life, even more than the actual content of the book, which marks this as his outstanding contribution.

Strehlow's academic career extended from the early 1930s. He became Reader (1954), then Professor in Australian Linguistics (1970-73); and on his retirement in 1974, Emeritus Professor. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Adelaide and Uppsala. Over the years, he was able to carry out field research for fairly long periods — for instance, in 1931-34 and 1953-65, and intermittently until quite recently when his health was failing. His was not solely an academic interest. He was deeply involved in practical issues concerning the impact of Europeans on the life and culture of the Aranda and adjacent Aboriginal groups. During 1936-42, he was attached to the Commonwealth administration, first as a patrol officer and then as Deputy-Director of Native Affairs in charge of the Central Australian area.
His views on Aboriginal-European relations are best expressed in three of his pamphlets: *The sustaining ideals of Australian Aboriginal societies* (1956), *Dark and white Australians* (1957), and *Nomads in no-man's-land* (1960). He was consistent in his view that there should be respect for and understanding of traditional Aboriginal society and culture, and that they had a special place in the emerging Australian nation; he emphasized that Aborigines should be consulted in all matters which concerned them; he reiterated that if there was an Aboriginal 'problem' it was also a 'white problem'; he opposed assimilation if it meant the destruction of a people's way of life; and he was insistent that Aborigines should be respected as persons, on equal terms with others, if the difficulties which faced them today were to be resolved.

Strehlow's major contributions lay in the fields of linguistics and the detailed recording and analysis of Aranda religion. Having learnt Aranda as a child, he was in an excellent position to extend and systematize its study, and in 1942-44 published *Aranda phonetics and grammar* (Oceania Monographs, No. 7). This had originally been prepared in 1934 and 1937, and constitutes the first available complete study of an Australian Aboriginal language. His *Aranda traditions* (1947), initially assembled as three papers in 1934, is an important work on Aboriginal religion, providing an insight into the relationships between myth and ritual—an insight which has been equalled but not surpassed in recent years. It remains a basic text on Central Australia. The detailed nature of this stands out clearly against the more generalized writing of Baldwin Spencer. This theme was expanded over the years—most notably as contributions in three volumes edited by my wife and/or myself. In 'The art of circle, line and square' (in *Australian Aboriginal art*, 1964) he considered the genesis of Aboriginal art, which he saw as being primarily religious. In 'Culture, social structure, and environment in Aboriginal Central Australia' (in *Aboriginal man in Australia*, 1965) he demonstrated the relationship between Aborigines and their environment, considering the essential linkage between art, song, myth, dance, rite and drama and the 'totemic' landscape, all of which provided a feeling of oneness with nature. And in 'Geography and the totemic landscape in Central Australia: a functional study' (in *Australian Aboriginal anthropology*, 1970) the thesis he expressed related to the quality of the social order based on religion, which presented the setting for the processes of social control and law. With his 'Personal monototemism in a polytotemic community' (in a *Festschrift* paper for Jensen, 1964), these make a significant contribution in their own right.

I have mentioned the uniqueness of *Songs of Central Australia*. In this Strehlow encapsulates the essence of traditional Aboriginal life. That was possible only because he possessed a special kind of insight, rare among workers in the Aboriginal field: a deep feeling for the people themselves, with an appreciation of their aesthetic expressions combined
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with the ability to translate the original Aranda, providing it with a traditional poetic quality. The impact Strehlow made and, in his work, continues to make, on the study of Aboriginal religion is yet to be assessed. There is, however, little doubt that within the area of song and translation he was and is paramount. The first article he published on this topic ('Ankotarinja, an Aranda myth', in Oceania, 1933) established him in that direction. His monumental work on Aranda song-poetry is one of the most remarkable and impressive yet published.

It was his concern with preserving a record of the fast-disappearing traditional life of the Aranda which led him and his second wife, Kathleen, to spend much of their time in recent years in endeavouring to form the basis of a Research Foundation. Through the work of his father and himself, much of Aranda culture which would have been irretrievably lost has survived. Some of this has been published; but the greater part of it, in manuscript form, together with photographs, films and recordings, has not. The Foundation which they envisaged was to be a place where all of this material could be stored, where research could be carried out upon it, so that it would become a continuing resource centre for Aranda and Loritja studies. Although a Committee had been set up to organize its establishment, great difficulties were experienced in obtaining adequate financial support.

Professor Strehlow had been ill, and had become increasingly disillusioned. However, he was considerably heartened by the plans to hold a special exhibition of his historical material. The date arranged for this was the evening of October 3, 1978. The exhibition was organized by his wife and himself to mark the official opening of the Research Foundation, named to commemorate his father and himself. He had been looking forward keenly to this. Tragically, and suddenly, his death came in the course of last-minute discussions at a meeting that afternoon, only a few hours before this event. Nevertheless, a decision was made to go ahead with the opening, as we all believe he would have wished. A record of that sad day is to be found in the Australasian Nurses Journal, (8 (3), 1978: 16-21, 30).

Professor Strehlow made significant contributions to the study of Aboriginal life and culture. His death leaves a considerable gap, impossible to fill. However, the vision of himself and his devoted colleague, Kathie Strehlow, in the form of the Strehlow Research Foundation, should ensure that his own and his father’s work is kept alive.

Mankwakila rawapuwei
Mirkwatnjelentopindei
Nodding sleepily he keeps on listening;
Fast asleep he is resting without a stir.

(From the northern Aranda bandicoot song of Ilbalintja, verse 45: Songs of Central Australia, 1971: 140.)
The preservation of his unpublished materials is vitally important, for future use by professional scholars and, significantly, for oncoming generations of Aranda, who will over the years increasingly turn to their own unique traditional Aboriginal heritage to find personal and social meaning and emotional stability in contemporary society.

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A.P. ELKIN (1891-1979): A PERSONAL MEMOIR

Peter Elkin Snr, for a long time the foremost authority on the Aborigines, departed this life the day after Aborigines Sunday 1979. The story of most of his life has been told. Here I record some recollections and impressions of the anthropologist who was my teacher and friend.

He was born, as I was, at West Maitland, New South Wales, but did not grow up there apart from living at Singleton while attending the Boys' High School at East Maitland. When he returned in 1930 as Rector of Morpeth with a Ph.D. in anthropology from University College, London, there was already a resident anthropologist. Walter J. Enright, a Maitland solicitor who had collaborated with R.H. Mathews in a paper on rock art in 1895, welcomed Elkin warmly. If there were any Aborigines around Maitland they were not visible. But Enright had befriended Aborigines of the Hawkesbury district, Port Stephens, and as far away as Taree and he introduced Elkin to them. They journeyed together, Enright recording details as a gifted amateur and Elkin investigating social organization and religion as a true professional.

I knew Enright, but I first encountered Elkin in my second year as an undergraduate at Sydney University, when I would have been reading Anthropology I if the Adviser to Women Students had not shunted me into other subjects. The slight, bird-like professor of anthropology was debating against John Anderson, one of several grand eccentrics around the quadrangle and the inspiration of many Arts students. Anderson's lilting cadences spread with honey his impressive and tortuous logic. This day he was persuasive as always, enlisting us flatteringly in his own intellectual elite. Elkin, however, took us down from our ivory towers. Looking like

1 Mainly in Berndt 1956; Berndt and Berndt 1965; Elkin 1958, 1959, 1962.
2 Elkin 1950.
a country bank manager and using language a farmhand or engine driver
would have understood, he arranged his argument methodically and what
he said made absolute sense. He was obviously a great teacher. The next
time the Adviser to Women Students told me not to do anthropology, I
defied her.

A striking aspect of Elkin's lectures was the enormous respect for
Aboriginal social organization and culture that he conveyed to us. This
comes out clearly in his writings, perhaps most prominently in his
Aboriginal men of high degree. Like Margaret Mead, he had a gift for
saying what he had to say simply and clearly; and his listeners and readers
were duly impressed with the dignity, seriousness, and complexity of Abo­
riginal life. When, later, I met Billy Rooke of Collarenebri, one of the 'men of
high degree', I found him to be a dignified old man living uncomplainingly
in appalling conditions. He reciprocated Elkin's respect for him and
laid claim to a firm friendship.

During my second year of anthropology I went to Elkin, who was
always approachable, wondering whether I could meet some Aborigines
and get the feel of fieldwork. He arranged at once for me to spend a
vacation at the Cootamundra Girls' Home. Later, when I had been doing
research among Aborigines in rural New South Wales, he invited me to
work briefly for the Aborigines' Welfare Board while the city welfare
officer was on leave. This enabled me to see what happened to the girls
after they graduated from Cootamundra and entered the sedate loneliness
of domestic service.

Up to 1931 Elkin had been concentrating on the analysis of social
organization, ritual, mythology, and totemism. But when he came across
atrocities against Aborigines on the Forrest River and elsewhere he was
drawn into playing an active part in the Association for the Protection of
Native Races. He argued for more positive policies than that of 'protection'
which was not even protective in its effects. In 1936 some Aborigines at
Burnt Bridge drew his attention to the way white people treated them and
immediately he began to address himself to the problems of 'mixed-
bloods', people of combined white and Aboriginal descent living mostly in
fringe camps and on supervised settlements.

As head of the only university department in Australia that taught
sociology as distinct from social work, Elkin saw the plight of Aborigines as
being comparable to that of the refugees who were escaping in increasing
numbers from the infamous Hitler and Stalin regimes and needed to find
secure places in Australian society. Both 'Abos' and 'Reffos' suffered the
handicaps of different languages, different cultures, and a lack of sympathy
that amounted to downright prejudice on the part of white Australians.
Elkin had idealistic dreams of the Aborigines becoming assimilated into
the greater Australian society as ethnic entities like the Irish and the

3 Elkin 1977 (first published 1945).
Scottish had been assimilated, taking their places in many different walks of life, but perhaps coming together for some periodic celebrations equivalent to Highland Gatherings or St Patrick’s Day. The success stories, against enormous odds, of Pastor Doug Nicholls and Captain Reg Saunders gave him hope. But the people who had to implement the assimilation policy tended to interpret it as plucking out favoured individuals and getting citizenship for them as a reward for virtue. Their only involvement in their own fate was their success in demonstrating middle class standards of home care and continuity of employment. These standards did not apply in the lowest rung of Australian society, the only one to which they could gain access without improved education and opportunity. Further, there would have been few middle class people who could have maintained these standards in a blacks’ camp, at least without a better water supply and a guarantee of no discrimination on the part of tradespeople. Elkin saw all these problems and strove energetically to get citizenship for the Aborigines and improve their living conditions, health and education. He did what he could, and that was a great deal.

Elkin recruited me to work among Aborigines in New South Wales when I would have preferred to go to New Guinea if funds had been available. By 1959 I had worked in both Papua and New Guinea and I went to Elkin for advice on where to go in the Northern Territory. He suggested Borroloola. That was my last Aboriginal fieldwork. I formed some wonderful friendships with Aborigines, but it was heartbreaking to have to stand by helplessly while they were insulted, shoved around, spat upon, punished for speaking their minds, and deprived of many of the liberties white people took for granted. I did not have Elkin’s knack of counting even the smallest gains in Aboriginal welfare and taking heart from them when the remaining problems loomed so large and so far from solutions.

It made me sad that Elkin’s body was cremated, for when I learned of his death my first thoughts were of visiting the graveyard at Collarenebri with Billy Rooke’s daughter, Una Thorne, and her possum familiar. I would have liked to gather some broken glass for his grave so that when the sun shone the sparkling light would return his spirit to us.

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——— Aboriginal men of high degree. St Lucia, 1977. (1st published 1945.)