

*The Aranda's Pepa: An Introduction to
Carl Strehlow's Masterpiece, Die Aranda-und
Loritja-Stamme in Zentral Australien (1907–1920)*

by Anna Kenny

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Review by Peter Sutton
South Australian Museum and University of Adelaide

Recent years of Australianist writing in anthropology, linguistics and other disciplines have been characterised by an unprecedented interest in the scholarship of a relatively neglected past. These were the works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prior to about 1925. Much of that early recording of Aboriginal cultural life was both unrepeatable and also carried out by missionaries. Although Aranda and Loritja people have retained their old cultures more than most, the research carried out on their ideas and practices and languages more than a century ago by the missionary Carl Strehlow has been overdue for the comprehensive reassessment now taking place. Anna Kenny's book lies within this appreciative recent development and will add considerable stimulation to it.

Not least of the reasons for this is that her chosen subject, Carl Strehlow (1871–1922), was a primary actor in the history of the most romantic theatre of the colonial drama of the Australian Outback, Central Australia. He also gave us his son, T. G. H. Strehlow, whose Gothic presence remains with us so vividly still, after his death in 1978, especially through his haunting *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969). And he gave us his grandson, John Strehlow, whose monumental and intense biography of his grandparents, Frieda and Carl (*The Tale of Frieda Keysser* 2011), continues for a third generation a dynasty of independent scholarship and Strehlovian struggle against marginalisation, dismissal and criticism. For a long time, T. G. H. (Ted) Strehlow worked alone to defend his

father's scholarly work against detractors, especially Baldwin Spencer. John has followed suit. In Anna Kenny, Ted and John have fine company from outside the family.

Among the various reasons for the comparative neglect of scholarly predecessors in the Australian Aboriginal field until recently has been that a number of them published only or mainly in German. Anna Kenny is able to play a significant role in this redressive process partly because she is a native speaker of German and a scholar of German-language intellectual traditions, as well as those of the English-writing world. And it is important that the large work she examines here, Carl Strehlow's five-volume *Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral Australien* (1907–1920), while it has been most recently translated into English in manuscript form by H. Oberscheidt, remains unpublished in English. Or not quite. The manuscript translation by Charles Chewings (1859–1937) held at the University of Adelaide's Barr Smith Library (MSS 572.994 S91a.E) is listed by the National Library of Australia as 'Published 1996', but is held by that library only in 'microform' (Dewey no. 305.89915) and not in print.

Strehlow's grand work concentrated on extensive ethnographic descriptions and on language description, and avoided global theorising. But Kenny is able, especially in Chapter 2, to show how nineteenth-century German philosophical and historical paradigms formed a deep if veiled background to Strehlow's approach. The most important of these appears to have been Herder's model of the *Volk* and the *Volksgeist* – the appreciation, on its own merits, of a cultural group and its essence or spirit. This Herderian respect for cultural difference was rooted in his early form of cultural particularism that stood apart from the evolutionist and culture-hierarchical theories that had gained currency in the English-speaking anthropological tradition by the late nineteenth century. They were soon to be blitzed by the synchronic and relativist emphasis on societal structure and function of, among others, the professional and specialised anthropologists Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the first half of the twentieth century.

Kenny generally prefers the term 'particularism' to 'relativism' in this discussion. She concentrates on the German intellectual traditions of the nineteenth century that clustered together under this modern rubric – it was no mystery that Franz Boas made it his stock in trade and became himself a mainspring of relativism's conquering of American anthropology. 'Cultures', not just 'culture', were an achievement of particularism in the German tradition.

Kenny does, however, point out that Strehlow's taxonomy of Aranda myths was a rather ill-fitting reproduction of the subdivisions of European folkloric narratives used by the Brothers Grimm and others – Myths, Legends, and Fairy-tales (pp. 141–146). That this was more than an ethnocentric categorisation is

made plain by Kenny, who insightfully concludes that because of it, together with Strehlow's organisation of the myths in terms of a story of creation followed by a descent from the heavens to the earth, 'the *modus operandi* of Aranda and Loritja myth was masked' (p. 145).

Although Kenny is skilled in showing how '[Strehlow's] magnum opus mirrors in a striking way the anthropological concerns in the Germany of his time' (p. 70), and that he had 'affinities both with a nineteenth century German tradition, and with the anthropology that Boas would develop' (p. 71), direct lines of transmission of such ideas to Strehlow remain largely obscure or, better, there were no direct lines and the process was instead osmotic. The grey eminence of his advisor/editor von Leonhardi may have lain somewhere in between.

The nub issue for the re-evaluation of Carl Strehlow's work that will expand once the English translation is properly published is going to be one that Kenny here already discusses in great detail. It is not that of Strehlow's particularism and modernity but that of his quality as a field ethnographer (even if sedentary) and linguist. This is because it arises from the cognate question of the value of ethnographic detail and linguistic recording as an end in itself, especially if it is considered merely a collection of words and customs and folkloric traditions, versus a globally oriented scholarship that uses descriptions in the service of shining a torchlight on the great paradigmatic questions of the day. And then there is the interstitial category between 'raw' ethnography and 'cooked' theory – namely the sorting efforts of typology and taxonomy such as 'kinship systems', 'types of totemism', 'forms of initiation' and so on. Spencer engaged in all three. Strehlow engaged mainly in the first two. More, however, is not necessarily better.

This reader, not at all a specialist in German thought, and unable to read German, is left puzzled by one of the conundrums raised by this book, though Kenny does not confront it. That is that while it is particularistic to believe that every *Volk* has its *Geist*, or *Volksgeist*, the very commitment to a people's essence as an irreducible given is not just the adoption of an intellectual framework but the embracing of an inherently emotional one as well. A national or ethnic 'spirit' is hardly a cold structure. It is never meant only as metaphor. It is an affective construction that has been put to the service of the relativism of mutual respect for difference, and the recovery of a battered indigeneity and pride within post-colonial Fourth World contexts. But it has no inherent or absolute character that enables it to be valorised as such. For it has also been put to the service of lethal emotions countless times – as when the world heard Joseph Goebbels PhD appeal centrally to the notion of *der deutsche Geist* on the night of the 'spontaneous' Burning of the Books by university students on 10 May 1933

in Berlin. Nazi ideology was, among other things, a variety of essentialist indigenism that attracted not just the marginal but academically trained middle-class intellectuals as well. Was it, then, also a case of particularism?

When the issue of translation is germane, as it is here, it raises the problem of the literary quality of anthropological and linguistic writing. The translation may always be better than the original, as a work of literature. One can hope such. This is more than a matter of 'style'. Powerful writing is not always elegant. Eloquence and insight are close bedfellows; both strain the limits of language and of the mind. They can be found in brilliance put to the service of 'mere description'. Dry, hard-hearted and pedestrian language can, conversely, be put to the service of the glamour world of hifalutin global theorising. In the end, description is not as quickly rendered *passé* as theorising. But dull and uninspired and insightless description will not survive much longer than the end of a theoretical paradigm that has been consigned to the dustbin of history – unless the description has a new purpose.

Native title and heritage protection and other Indigenous Affairs contexts of contemporary Australia have resurrected many of the ethnographic and linguistic legacies of the past and given them a new reason to live. In order for Carl Strehlow's master work to be considered, as Kenny claims, not just a present-day mine of data useful for, say, expert evidence in Federal Court litigations, but a 'masterpiece' as well, it will have to be an aesthetic as well as an informative experience.

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