Introduction

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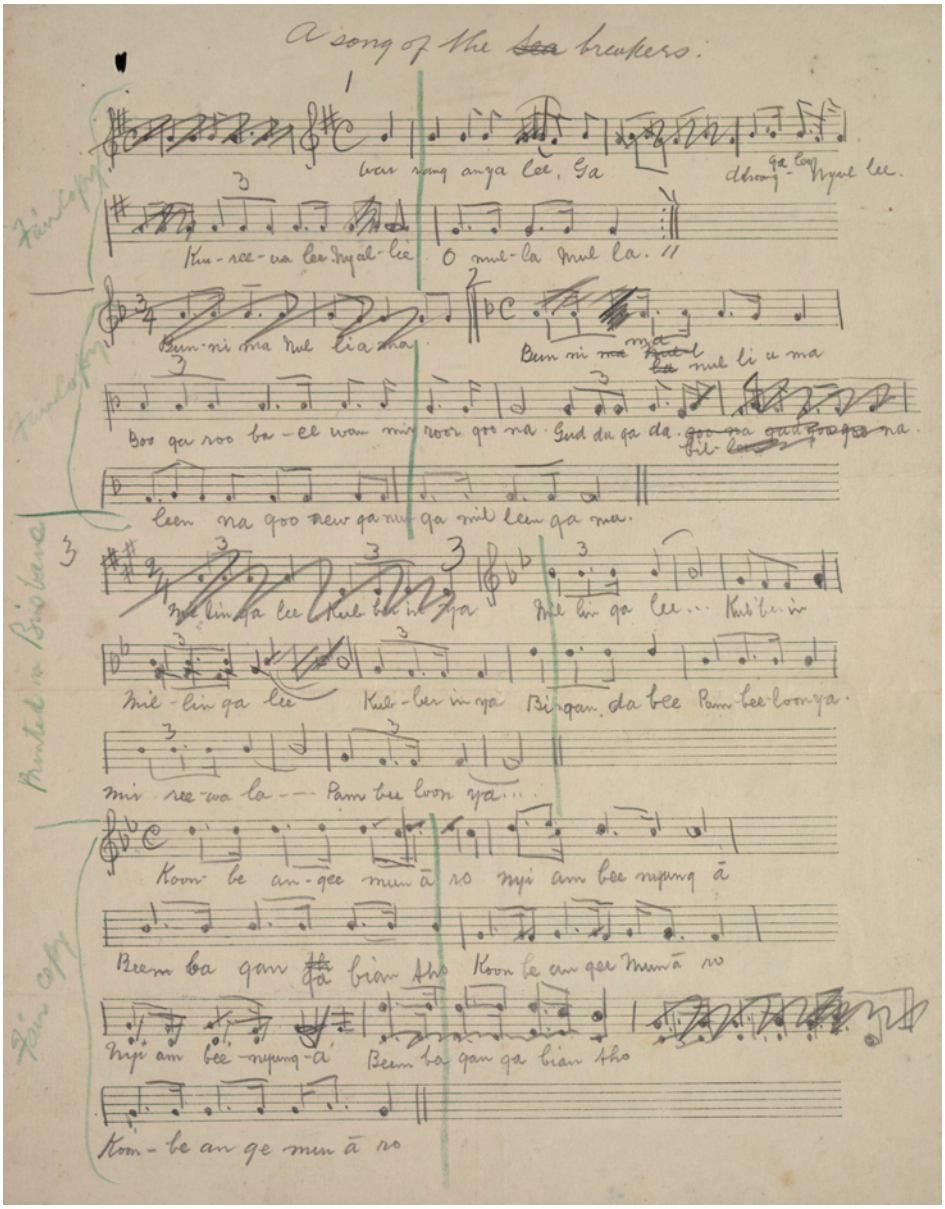
In an article on songs and songmakers, which R. H. Mathews must have read in his early days as an anthropologist, A. W. Howitt remarked that 'there is but little of the life of the Australian savage, either in peace or war, which is not in some measure connected with song'.[1] So it is not surprising that oral traditions were an important aspect of Mathews' cross-cultural research. His first contribution to the subject was a series of seven legends from various parts of New South Wales, published in 1898 as 'Folklore of the Australian Aborigines' by the anthropological magazine *Science of Man*.[2] He republished them as a short book the following year.[3] Two of these legends are reprinted in this volume. Over the next decade, Mathews published another dozen articles describing Aboriginal myths. In one of these, 'A Giant in a Cave—An Australian Legend' (reproduced this volume), the by-line is omitted. But the hand of Mathews is obvious, and offprints of the article appear in his own bound volumes of his collected works. Folklore study is the only strand of his research that was published entirely in English, so no translations appear in this section of the book. Evidence in Mathews' unpublished papers reveals that apart from a few legends from Western Australia that were documented by a correspondent,[4] the great bulk of his folklore research was done in person.

Mathews used the descriptor 'folklore' to describe Aboriginal stories. If this appears to trivialise them, that was not his intention. Folklore study was a serious branch of inquiry during Mathews' lifetime and it provided a framework for his documentation of oral traditions. While the influence of evolutionary anthropology on early Aboriginal studies has been extensively documented,[5] the impact of the long tradition of folklore research has received comparatively little attention. Although the term 'folk-lore' entered English as recently as 1846, the publication and analysis of vernacular beliefs, proverbs and stories had its roots in sixteenth-century Britain. Scholarly interest in folkloric culture blossomed in the nineteenth century, fuelled by concern that old ways and beliefs were disappearing with the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. The Folklore Society, formed in 1878, was dedicated to the study of traditional music, customs, folk art, fairy tales and other vernacular traditions.[6] The society published *Folk-Lore*, an internationally distributed journal, to which Mathews contributed five articles including some of the stories reprinted here.



R. H. Mathews documented the music and lyrics of this 'Song of the Breakers' on the South Coast of NSW. By permission of the National Library of Australia. (R.H. Mathews Papers, NLA6006/5/12).

The Folklore Society and kindred organisations in other parts of the world were initially concerned with the traditional life of Europeans. Eventually, however, the interests of many folklore scholars widened to include the study of so-called primitive cultures. It is by no means coincidental that Andrew Lang and E. S. Hartland, two of Mathews' few allies in British anthropology, played a significant role in directing folklore study towards Australian and other 'native' cultures. Hartland, a solicitor by profession, first published studies of fairytales and treatises on the oral lore of his home county of Gloucestershire. Lang, a Scotsman, was one of the most prolific writers in Britain. He published novels, poems, criticism, compendia of fairytales, and numerous works of anthropology. Lang followed the Australian scene closely, and corresponded with various ethnographic researchers including Catherine Eliza Somerville Stow (who published as K. Langloh Parker), Daisy Bates and R. H. Mathews. Lang wrote the preface for Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* (1896), a collection of legends from western New South Wales. In its day, it was the most substantial book on Aboriginal mythology. Mathews read it closely, and it probably influenced his decision to research and publish on this aspect of Aboriginal culture.[7]

In 1898 Lang and Hartland debated each other about whether Australian Aborigines 'possessed the conception of a moral Being'.[8] This greatly stimulated Hartland's interest in Australia. The shared interest in folklore helps explain the rapport between Mathews and Hartland, evident in their friendly exchange of letters (see 'Correspondence', this volume). Writing of the mythology he had collected, Mathews suggested to Hartland that he could prepare a substantial book on the subject, 'a good sized volume, say 200 pages,' containing legends and songs.[9] But the plan never came to fruition.

As the articles reproduced here indicate, Mathews said little about the circumstances in which he heard the stories he documented. He also admitted to censoring parts of stories, owing to their 'obscene character'.[10] Consistent with the *Folk-Lore* style, he rephrased Aboriginal narratives in what to him was respectable English. It is interesting that this practice was not a problem for Hartland or for the British and American journals in which Mathews' versions of Aboriginal myth were published. But as we see in a letter from the German editor Moritz von Leonhardi, it was less acceptable in Europe. Responding to Mathews' transcription of an Aboriginal song, von Leonhardi complained:

> Are the words not translatable? It would be highly interesting to know the meaning. We are still lacking good texts in the original language with interlinear translation; of course the texts would have to have been recorded with the greatest precision. Such texts, though, would be more pertinent at the moment than grammars and vocabularies, which the scholar in the end—if the texts are only somewhat extensive—could

> derive from them himself. How much there is still to do on the ethnography of Australia and how soon it will be forever too late![11]

Von Leonhardi was publisher of the Lutheran missionary-anthropologist Carl Strehlow who lived in the Central Australian settlement of Hermannsburg. Encouraged by von Leonhardi, Strehlow's documentation of myth is premised on just the sort of transcription and 'interlinear translation' promoted above.[12] But Strehlow translated into his mother-tongue, German, and not into English—and Strehlow's pioneering methodology remains under-recognised in the Anglophone world.

Von Leonhardi recognised, that 'the *ipissima verba* [actual words] of the person reporting often matters a lot'.[13] Mathews' rewording of legends tended to efface the idiom, the narrative strategies and the manner of performance. Many Aboriginal narratives belong to particular locations and are told in situ. But strangely, given his background in surveying, discussion of site is not a feature of Mathews' documentation. Occasionally he names individual storytellers, but never does he remark on the gestures and movements that accompanied the narratives. However, a comment in a notebook gives some insight into the qualities of the performances he observed.

> When telling a story the natives go into very full detail, giving an accurate description of everything that was done. If anyone's words are repeated, the intonation is changed.[14]

Mathews also acknowledged that story-telling was connected with the musical culture. He documented the lyrics of several Aboriginal songs and on a few occasions set them to music.[15] He pointed out that the

> songs or chants of the aborigines take a very prominent place in the customs and lore of the Tribes. These songs are essential factors in the great corroborees; they enter every part of the important and imposing ceremonies of initiation; they are found in the superstitions and folklore of the people.[16]

In his unpublished biographical notes, William Mathews made revealing comments about his father's interest in mythology. He discerned a correspondence between the ancient Hebrew stories at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition and those of Aboriginal Australia. William wrote:

> There were few people outside the ranks of the clergy who had so thoroughly digested the contents of the Bible as R. H. M. had done … [B]eing very much interested in folk lore and such things from an early age, he seemed to grasp the fundamental truths that underlay the stories related in the Bible, the writers of which had such a clear understanding of human nature, and, for the most part, recorded what they had to say

> in such a simple and straightforward fashion … [I]n R. H. M.'s opinion, the Bible was largely a collection of the folk tales of an eastern people, for it seemed to him that these stories had their origin clearly stamped upon them, a factor which rendered them all the more interesting to him.[17]

So it is not surprising that notes from the Bible can be found among Mathews' papers.[18] There are also translations into Dharawal of excerpts from St Luke's Gospel, including the parable of the Prodigal Son.[19] These were drafted at the La Perouse settlement on Botany Bay, an area strongly influenced by missionaries. While Mathews also documented a Kamilaroi version of the death of Lazarus,[20] biblical translation was not a typical aspect of his cross-cultural research. His mission was to study Aboriginal beliefs, not proselytise his own. William describes his father as 'unusually tolerant of all forms of religious belief and ritual … and he was generally inclined to indulge his love of "leg-pulling" when anyone attempted to insist … that salvation could be reached by one road and by one road only'.[21] Mrs Emma Timbery, Mrs Golding, Mrs Robert Lock, Harry Mathews, and other Aboriginal teachers of Dharawal named in Mathews' notebook,[22] would have known Christian parables long before he visited in the 1890s. Finding common ground through storytelling was a valuable way of communicating language and other beliefs. Perhaps the Dharawal people narrated the story of the Prodigal Son in their language, knowing that Mathews would understand the basic narrative.

The complex dynamics of cross-cultural research and its attendant transformations are discernible in all the legends republished here. Mathews set out to 'collect' stories for possible publication, but we can assume that his storytellers had their agendas also. Stories are a form of education as well as entertainment, and Mathews' teachers undoubtedly used them to induct him into the culture. Readers of Aboriginal legends (or more often whitefellow renditions of them) sometimes complain that they sound like children's stories. This is not always so off-the-mark. While the long history of infantilising Aboriginal people should not be forgotten, we must bear in mind that outsiders are likely to first encounter the simpler aspects of Aboriginal culture, which has its own traditions of storytelling for children. Such tales, designed for the uninitiated (and thus not secret-sacred), would have been obvious choices for sharing with a researcher such as Mathews. They were simple and short and, as we know from the notebooks, told in English, which was often the second or third language of Mathews' Aboriginal teachers. So it would not be surprising if they veered towards simpler and shorter stories, if only for the ease of telling. Some of the legends reproduced here possibly fall into that category.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the longer, more complex stories originate from areas close to Sydney where Mathews developed long-term

relationships. The remarkable tale of Mirragañ and Gurangatch, recounted in 'Some Mythology of the Gundungurra Tribe, New South Wales' (1908), explains the creation of the southern Blue Mountains. A great fish (Gurangatch) carves out the rivers as he tries to escape a native cat or quoll (Mirragañ) who wants to eat him. Mathews made periodic visits to the Burragorang Valley where he met with Gundungurra people who resided for the most part on Aboriginal reserves. Mathews assembled a larger folio of Gundungurra traditions, perhaps intended for the book mentioned to Hartland.[23] But this work remained unpublished until 2003.[24] Despite the rather Victorian diction, the story of Mirragañ and Gurangatch is clearly rooted in the Blue Mountains topography, revealing a remarkable knowledge of the landscape and its fauna. As I have noted elsewhere, the story is a verbal map, sufficient in some parts for navigational purposes.[25]

It is interesting to compare Mathews' account of this story with the greatly vulgarised version published by A. W. Reed in his collection *Myths and Legends of Australia* (1965).[26] Reed used Mathews as his source, but dumbed the story down by eradicating place names and geographical detail, and taking other liberties with the text. The comparison emphasises the value of Mathews' perspective as a surveyor. His professional interest in cartography allowed him to appreciate the knowledge of terrain displayed in the story. These details survive, even if the original language is mostly lost. Similar traits are apparent in the Dharawal narrative titled 'The Hereafter', reprinted here. Concerned with the spirit's journey into the next world, the account starts at Coolangatta, an irregularly shaped massif near the mouth of the Shoalhaven River. The spirit of a deceased person ascends the mount and from there travels eastwards across the ocean, eventually arriving in the country of the afterlife. In some ways this account is even more remarkable than that of Mirragañ and Gurangatch, for Mathews describes the realm of the Hereafter with the same attention that he pays to the here and now.

The stories here are the residue of cultural brokerage between Mathews and his Aboriginal teachers. He also learnt about cultural exchange *within* Aboriginal society from his study of myth. Perhaps he was thinking about the quoll Mirragañ when he observed in 'Remarks on the Natives of Australia' (1906) (this volume) that through the retelling and circulation of stories 'ideas were exchanged between distant tribes, which never associated with each other'. Mathews himself would observe how *Mirragañ*, the great fisherman of the Blue Mountains, was also the name of a section of the Aboriginal fish traps at Brewarrina, 700 km away.[27] It is even possible that direct exchange occurred between the Blue Mountains and Brewarrina communities, even in ancient times. A story about a great flood, told by Ngemba people at Brewarrina to David Unaipon, the

Aboriginal writer and inventor, has an episode that occurs in the Blue Mountains.[28]

In the stories published here we can see for ourselves parallels between Gurangatch, the monster fish who creates rivers, valleys and cave systems, and the Rainbow Serpent, the protean creation hero known through much of Australia, especially in the north. In the article 'Australian Folk-Tales' (this volume) Mathews gives a short Kamilaroi version, related by Jimmy Nerang whom he met at Tallwood, northern New South Wales, in 1895. The 'serpent-like monster' is named Wahwee and through the mediation of clever men who meet with him in a den beneath a riverbank, he introduces new songs to the community. As I mentioned earlier in this volume, Mathews himself was associated with such clever men. He was given the nickname Birrarak, a term used in the Gippsland region of Victoria to describe people who communicated with the spirits of the deceased, from whom they learned dances and songs (see my general introduction to this volume).[29] With this information, and with the understanding that dances and stories circulate through economies of exchange, we might think about the role played by Mathews in communicating whitefellow understandings to the people with whom he worked. This is largely a matter for speculation, for Mathews was too secretive to document what stories he might have offered in exchange.

ENDNOTES

[1] Howitt, A. W. 1887, 'Notes on Songs and Songmakers of some Australian Tribes', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 16, p. 328.

[2] RHM 1898, 'Folklore of the Australian Aborigines', *Science of Man*, vol. 1 (new series).

[3] RHM 1899, *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines*, Hennessey, Harper and Company, Sydney.

[4] RHM 1909, 'Folklore Notes from Western Australia', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 20.

[5] See for example, Stocking, George W. Jr 1995, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison; Mulvaney, D. J. and Calaby, J. H. 1985, *'So Much That is New': Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton; Hiatt, L. R. 1996, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; and Wolfe, Patrick 1999, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Cassell, London.

[6] Dorson, Richard M. 1968, *The British Folklorists: A History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, ch. 1.

[7] In a footnote to the legend he published as 'The Hereafter' (reproduced this volume), Mathews says Parker 'deserves the thanks of all who are interested in the folklore of the Australian aborigines'.

[8] Dorson, *The British Folklorists*, p. 245.

[9] Mathews to Hartland, 9 April 1907, Letters to E. S. Hartland, National Library of Wales MS 16889C. Reproduced this volume.

[10] Mathews, *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines*, p. 6.

[11] Von Leonhardi to Mathews, 9 June 1908, Strehlow Research Centre (henceforth SRC) Manuscripts. Reproduced this volume. Trans. Christine Winter.

[12] Strehlow, C. 1907-20, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stamme in Zentral-Australien*, Joseph Baer & Co, Frankfurt am Main, vols I & II.

[13] Von Leonhardi to Mathews, 9 June 1908, SRC Manuscripts. Reproduced this volume. Trans. Christine Winter.

[14] 'General Notes re Aborigines [draft]', R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 8006/5/8.

[15] RHM 1901-02, 'The Thoorga Language', *Queensland Geographical Journal*, vol. 17, pp. 61-3 and RHM 1907, *Notes on the Aborigines of New South Wales*, Government Printer of New South Wales, Sydney, p. 35.

[16] Untitled draft, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/5/12.

[17] Biographical and Historical Notes of the Mathews Family, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/7/8.

[18] Notebook inscribed 'R. H. Mathews, Surveyor, Hassall Street, Parramatta', R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/1.

[19] Notebook with red cover, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/6.

[20] Notebook No. 2, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/5.

[21] Biographical and Historical Notes of the Mathews Family.

[22] Notebook No. 5, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/5.

[23] 'Some Mythology of the Gundungurra Tribe', R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/5/10.

[24] RHM in Smith, Jim (ed.) 2003, *Some Mythology and Folklore of the Gundungurra Tribe*, Den Fenella Press, Wentworth Falls, NSW.

[25] Thomas, Martin 2003, *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton.

[26] Reed, A.W. 1965, *Aboriginal Legends of Australia*, Taplinger, New York, pp. 193-8.

[27] RHM 1903, 'The Aboriginal Fisheries at Brewarrina', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 37.

[28] Unaipon, David 2001, 'The Flood and its Result' in Muecke, Stephen and Shoemaker, Adam (eds) 2001, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, Miegunyah, Carlton South, Vic.

[29] The tradition of learning songs through interactions with the dead still continues in northern Australia. See Marett, Allan 2005, *Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut.