

# The Australian

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## Mission statement brings indigenous settlement back in sight

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Frieda Keysser and Carl Strehlow, May 1896.

*Source:* Supplied

**BY way of orientation, in the early pages of his vast, compelling family history, which is also, given his descent-line, the history of European involvement with the Aboriginal people of central Australia, John Strehlow recalls two distinct episodes of diary reading.**

These are sketched with a novelist's eye for detail, a chronicler's precision and a dramatist's sense of scene.

In the first, the author pictures himself as a boy, about 10 years old, glancing through a set of notebooks packed away in the family garage inside dark green camel boxes. They are field diaries from the desert, written by his father, Ted Strehlow, the famous anthropologist whose researches brought the song cycles of the centre to the wider world.

The boy opens the diaries. He reads, and is transfixed: ceremonies, the moon in the sky casting its light, men singing, their chants rising in the clear air: "It was written with such aching love, such nostalgia." At which point his father's car draws up, the boy hurriedly returns the forbidden books to their hiding place and makes himself scarce.

As an adult, many years later, John Strehlow set out on a quest: he wanted to understand the predicament of central Australia and the plight of the Aboriginal peoples living in the communities round Alice Springs. His father had studied them; his grandfather, the Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow, had devoted his life to them, learned their language and spent almost three decades in the remote settlement of Hermannsburg.

In 1922 Carl fell gravely ill at his post. He retreated, bound for Adelaide, and died on the torturous southward journey, and that death was turned into literature in his son's jewel-like book *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. What could another Strehlow do to understand his forebears? John scoured the records kept from Carl's mission days: there was little in the way of private materials left.

Then he remembered the diaries of his grandmother, Carl's wife, Frieda, written in German, in the old script, and locked

in a steel trunk in a cellar in Berlin. At that stage he had no idea those diaries had accompanied Frieda when she was a refugee in 1945, fleeing the Red Army on the roads of Silesia, or that she had carried them with her on her journey through the desert floods near Oodnadatta in 1910 - but something of this special provenance could be felt: "The first diary was perhaps the most exciting object I had ever held, largely because of what I was hoping to find - the key which would unlock the secrets of a victory over death and despair in a bygone age about which little or nothing was known, and which had troubled me ever since I could remember."

Sprung from these roots of inheritance and intuition, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*, 17 years in the writing, almost 1200 pages and 600,000 words long, is the result: at once a painstaking reconstruction of the past and an intense questioning of today's conventional wisdom; a detective story, a landmark in intellectual history; an account of the Australian frontier and its scapegrace dramas, a work that stands in a tradition and completes an arc.

Carl Strehlow's own pioneering study of the beliefs and practices he researched at Hermannsburg, The Aranda and Luritja Tribes of Central Australia, was published in Frankfurt, in eight parts, from 1908 onwards, under the tutelage of a gifted amateur, Moritz von Leonhardi. That book took the learned societies of Europe by storm, and redefined the fashionable new field of Australian ethnography. It was much praised, much criticised and much plagiarised, but never published in English.

Perhaps its deepest influence was exerted on Ted Strehlow, who published his own 800-page magnum opus, *Songs of Central Australia*, in 1971, almost half a century after his father's death. *Songs*, an unfindable treasure for bibliophiles, the only book to bring a classical sensibility to Aboriginal song poetry, still seems imbued with the emblematic grief and grandeur of Ted Strehlow: patrol officer, collector, unquiet spirit, betrayer of much he loved.

The shadows of these two volumes loom over John Strehlow's *The Tale of Freida Keysser*. Together, the three books now dominate the landscape of central Australian literature, much like the three great tors rising from the desert's terrain: Mount Connor, the Olgas and Ayers Rock.

This publication, then, is an event. It puts forward for the first time, from Frieda's diaries, a detailed record of day-to-day life at Hermannsburg in the crucial years when the shape of the frontier was being forged, and the survival of the Aranda and Luritja people of the centre hung in the balance. It explores the Lutheran enterprise and makes plain the constant pressures the missionaries faced: it describes in detail their approach to the collision between western and Aboriginal cultures, and sets that approach against the paradigm advanced by pastoralists and colonial administrators.

Gradually, insistently, Strehlow moves towards an appraisal. There were two rival blueprints for Aboriginal remote Australia. They were very different in their prescriptions and their assumptions. Their effects can now be judged.

In the context of the continuing commonwealth intervention in the remote communities of the Northern Territory, Strehlow's verdict in this book is striking: with an excavating archeologist's cool persistence he traces elements in the outlook and the policies of the modern bureaucratic establishment back to their deep sources in the secular anthropology of a century ago. He is explicit about this: he hopes his readers may include "those with an interest in aboriginal people who have witnessed the recent laudable efforts of governments to redress the wrongs of the past, and noted that too often things seem not to be getting better".

Biography. History. Cultural investigation, Strehlow's *Tale* is all these things, but it would not be truly Strehlovian if it were not, at its heart, a story of displacement, exile and return, an evocation in words of the Inland, its hard, serried paragraphs sheltering abrupt passages of romantic, lyric force. Rain comes, the desert blooms:

*Budgerigars appear from nowhere in flocks of thousands, at dawn and dusk swooping and coursing through the sky in fantastic fast-moving formations as they await their turn at waterholes, and when they land, the sand beside those waterholes turns a brilliant, pulsating green from the flutter of tiny wings*

Dingoes howl: "that strange, haunting, mournful drawn-out cry which wakes so many sleepers in the wilds, penetrating even the deepest dream". This book is a written incarnation of country, the desert in the mind, the same landscape Carl Strehlow found waiting for him, when, barely 20, still fresh from his Franconian seminary training, he was transferred to the centre, to the world of the Aranda. It was the beginning of a love affair, a strange obsession that forms the key theme of this narrative. The Aranda living with him at Hermannsburg became the heart of his life. He mastered their language in its finest details. They were part of him and he would never be fully at ease within his mind again:

*This relationship was a twisted skein of dramas - and from now on, running like an unbroken thread through his letters, his public speeches and no doubt his dreams, constantly surfacing, constantly infuriating and delighting him, these people and their activities, their fights, their feuds, their joys, their darkest secrets and their deepest sorrows little by little but ever more insistently, came to dominate his thoughts.*

They also shaped his family life. Frieda, his young bride, had joined him and their children grew up alongside the Aranda. At a time when ethnography was a field for amateurs and armchair hobbyists, Carl Strehlow was embedded, engaged, full-time. At a time when Aboriginal people were seen as doomed to extinction, he was committed to preserving them. Converting them, yes, but preserving their lives above all.

The facts of the case, set out in painful detail here, are that introduced venereal diseases were killing the indigenous peoples of the inland: almost every white man in the centre took Aboriginal women. Sexually transmitted diseases were pandemic. Birth rates were plummeting, deaths were multiplying. The missionaries knew this; the authorities knew it as well, and one of the chief aims of the administration of the centre was to keep these embarrassing matters quiet. It was only after decades of the Hermannsburg mission's operation that the mortality rates began to turn around: if Strehlow and his colleagues had not been in the field, it is doubtful there would be many Aranda people living today. Faced with the evidence of these interactions on the frontier, Strehlow came to clear conclusions.

Old beliefs that were no longer suited to the new times and stresses of the frontier should be changed, he felt, but changed gradually, not extirpated. He opted for a double social system. Hermannsburg sheltered a large group of Aranda: most were not Christians. It was a sanctuary. Tradition and ceremony thrived; old and new religions and life-ways coexisted and mingled. This perspective set Strehlow at odds with a range of adversaries, most notably the two founding heroes of mainstream Australian anthropology, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen. John Strehlow describes this pair in detail, catching their qualities, finding them out. In their dealings with the mission and the foreign-seeming missionaries, Spencer and Gillen, like most other outside knowledge seekers, were manipulative and fraudulent, concealing their intellectual debts, engaging in repeated slanders and distortions, painting Hermannsburg as a kind of hell.

At bottom, this conflict, which would have profound consequences for the history of Aboriginal remote Australia, was a clash of world views, and it lies at the heart of *The Tale of Freida Keysser*, giving the book a sharp contemporary bite.

With his sense of connection to the story and his extraordinary capacity for archival sleuthing in several languages, John Strehlow presents the evidence. He sets out his conclusions, too, in direct fashion.

The crescendo of this first of two lengthy volumes is an assessment of anthropology's impact on its indigenous subjects, a topic rarely addressed with such verve, because it is usually addressed by anthropologists themselves. Spencer, Gillen and the establishment expected indigenous people to die out, and the part-Aboriginal population to be absorbed in the mainstream. Carl Strehlow, as his grandson writes, may have been almost the only person of his time to reject the "doomed race" scenario, just as he was almost alone in knowing traditional people on a more than superficial level.

But it was anthropology, in its gradual evolutions, not Lutheran missionary thinking, that set the agenda for the Australian inland in the early 20th century. Spencer and Gillen and their contemporaries wanted their natives "pure", unadulterated. They made sure the men and women they photographed were unclothed. Tradition was what they were hunting. Adaptation and education were not their priorities, as they believed the time of the Aborigine was coming to an end.

The contrast between this perspective and the mission one was stark. Hence their critique: the missions were changing things, and thus by definition "ruining" an unspoilt people.

But the argument could be made that the Hermannsburg strategy of progressive integration was the most viable path into the future for desert families. The missions damped down the violence that the frontier bred, and when the mission time in remote Australia came to a close, things fell apart. Aboriginal people in the remote world found themselves subjects, administered from afar and without a voice. Outside spokesmen, would-be defenders of their traditions, pontificated for them instead -- the engaged anthropological class, whose kind are still out bush today: researchers, documentarists and cultural co-ordinators, tracking the secrets of the inland down.

John Strehlow's polemic in his closing pages links the frontier of his grandfather's time with our own. The past was prologue: it was disputes from a century ago that set the parameters for indigenous policy's conundrums today. Clear, cleanly argued, relentless in its expositions, this is a work that brings the far-off settlement at Hermannsburg back before our eyes.

But it is also a book with private resonances. Its subject is Carl Strehlow, but its hidden presence is Ted Strehlow, the prince of anthropologists, John Strehlow's father, a man who loved the Aranda and thought he was living "in the sunset of an age".

John Strehlow recounts the moments in which he read the letter telling him about his father's death. He was sitting in the offices of the Bank of Adelaide in Leadenhall Street in London. "A great wave of sorrow surged up inside me," he writes,

*In him was embodied the whole lost world of Hermannsburg which had been a kind of mirage dimly visible in the distance at the beginning of my personal journey.*

Now that mirage-world is clearly drawn, and vivid: grandfather, father and son are yoked together by books as well as blood.

***The Tale of Frieda Keysser: Frieda Keysser and Carl Strehlow, An Historical Biography, Volume 1: 1875-1910***

By John Strehlow

Wild Cat Press, London ([www.strehlow.co.uk](http://www.strehlow.co.uk) (<http://www.strehlow.co.uk/>)), 1198pp, \$89.95 (HB)

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**John Strehlow's** *The Tale of Frieda Keysser* will be launched this Sunday, February 12, at the Australian Lutheran College, North Adelaide, at 3pm.

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