

# Ringin' true: Strehlow book sets mission record straight

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- Written by: [Lyllal Kupke](#)
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**On Sunday afternoon 12 February the book, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser* by John Strehlow was launched at Australian Lutheran College by Ms Alison Anderson, Member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. Her electorate of Macdonnell in Central Australia includes all the lands covered by Finke River Mission.**

After speaking first in her own language of Aranda (Arrarnta), Ms Anderson acknowledged the life-saving work of Frieda and Carl Strehlow at Hermannsburg, the home town of her childhood.

She claimed that 'many Central Australian Aboriginal people are here today only because of the work these missionaries did in the early years'.

The Lutheran missionaries were concerned about the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal people, while other Europeans thought they were a dying race. Frieda and Carl showed that with love and attention the lives of the people could be saved and they could take their place in the new way of life that was being thrust onto them by British rule. 'By 1922 the mission had been transformed into a thriving outpost', she said.

She was critical of those anthropologists who 'wanted to keep the people unspoiled', and she thanked the mission for assisting the people to adjust to the changes in Australian society. 'This book provides the lesson for anthropologists past and present', she said.

'For me this book rings true with what I knew from my own childhood ... For those of us who grew up within the mission history of Central Australia, there is never a bad word said about the missions. We are still grateful for the opportunity they gave us.'

In writing this book about his grandparents John Strehlow used to a large extent the diaries of his grandmother Frieda and the letters of his grandfather Carl. Frieda maintained a detailed record of her time on the mission and kept her diaries throughout her lifetime. She left them for her children in Germany, where John was able to read them. Carl's letters are in the Lutheran Archives, where they record his work at Hermannsburg.

Through these vital records historians get a detailed picture of Carl and Frieda's contribution to the Aranda and Luritja (Luritja) people and they can pass on the stories of their strong faith amid trials and hardship.

At the launch John paid tribute to the 'Lutheran faithful', who had supported the Finke River Mission from one generation to the next. He referred to the lists of donors to the mission that are recorded in the pages of the church papers. Some examples from 1904 include: 'wedding collection Pumpa-Wiencke £3/11/9; widow M Jenke 2/6'. Their individual contributions were not large, but they reflected their determined support for the work of the mission.

Around 40 people present at the launch indicated that they or their parents or grandparents had worked for Finke River Mission. Many stories were shared between them afterwards.



**John Strehlow with Alison Anderson MP, who launched his monumental work *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*. Ms Anderson said that 'many Central Australian Aboriginal people are here today only because of the work the missionaries did in the early years'.**

Photo: Rosie Scheffe

Lyll Kupke, Archivist at the Lutheran Archives, which co-sponsored the launch with the Board of Finke River Mission, congratulated John on his determination to find out the truth of his grandparents in their time at Central Australia. John's research stretched back over 35 years. In order to read and interpret the writings of his grandparents, he first had to learn to read the old German handwriting, which very few people, even today in Germany, can read and understand.

At the Lutheran Archives John inspected all the correspondence between Carl Strehlow and the Mission Committee chairmen over the 28 years that Carl served at Hermannsburg. During numerous visits to the Archives over a series of years John made thousands of photocopies to take home to decipher and translate.

Lyll said, 'I believe that this book will make a very important contribution to the history of our country and to the understanding of indigenous affairs in our land, in addition to improving our appreciation of the role of Lutheran missions in Australia. As well, the book will become a collector's item and it will increase in value in the future. And I guarantee it will provide you with many long hours of fascinating and enjoyable reading over the next few weeks, and maybe months.'

*The Tale of Frieda Keysser* covers the years up to 1910. The next volume will be published at a later date. The book is 1200 pages long, with many photographs. It can be purchased from Lutheran Archives, 27 Fourth Street, Bowden SA 5007, (08 8340 4009, email [lutheran.archives@lca.org.au](mailto:lutheran.archives@lca.org.au)). The price is \$90 (plus postage: \$10 in SA, \$15 interstate).

**Related story:** [The Tale of Frieda Keysser \('Stepping Stones'\)](#), published in *The Lutheran* March 2012