

Victory over death and despair in a bygone age. (Thoughts on John Strehlow's *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*, Wild Cat Press, London 2011)

I have always perceived a great significance in the Strehlow story. For me, till recently, it was the story of T.G.H. (Ted) Strehlow born at remote Hermannsburg Mission in the central Australian desert in 1908, growing up among young Aranda boys and girls speaking their language as a mother tongue; then going back to Central Australia as a graduate from Adelaide University in 1932 to write the first linguistic description of an Australian aboriginal language and being invested with the sacred myths and chants by the old men who no longer trusted their sons to continue their traditions. And though I know you can read the Ted Strehlow story less controversially or breathlessly it has always spectacularly entranced me. I think of all the travelling that T.G.H.S. did in his 20s by camel across thousands of hot, dusty miles collecting, transcribing and piecing together chants (sometimes given whole) and myths from old aboriginal men and I consider it a kind of Wagnerian project or at least something akin to the work Lönnrot did in Finland creating the *Kalevala* from kennings collected near and far.

I always hoped to meet T.G.H. Strehlow and in fact I remember exactly where I was when I was told (by a Territorian, John Schlank) one evening in January 1979 that he'd died some months previously. I was staying in Wolseley Street, Tennant Creek, at the home of my friends, the Speakmans. Later I conceived and wrote the libretto for a symphonic cantata (or concert drama) based on T.G.H. Strehlow's novel, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (music by Andrew Schultz), an account of an urgent, life-and-death journey taken down the dry bed of the Finke River by the Strehlow family (Pastor Carl Strehlow, his wife, Frieda and their 14 year-old son, Theo) in 1922. You see, I feel I have a personal connection. And that is one of the great poignant plusses of John Strehlow's book, *The Tale of Frieda Keysser: Investigations into a Forgotten Past*, his account of the lives of his grandparents, Carl and Frieda, who managed Hermannsburg Mission, 80 miles west of Alice Springs, for nearly-30 years from 1895-1922: this massive epic, titled innocuously *The Tale of Frieda Keysser*, seems, to a large extent, to be a filling in of stories that John and his siblings, the younger Theo and Shirley, must have heard around their Adelaide dining room table told by their father, Ted Strehlow, the son of Carl and Frieda, who was the young boy, Theo, in that epic trek to Horseshoe Bend.

To my mind, T.G.H.'s story is one of the greatest stories Australians will ever have about the ways in which whitefellas can or cannot live in this land, for in one version of his story, he couldn't stick to the proscriptions under which he was entrusted with secret-sacred aboriginal material and succumbed to an offer of money to reveal those secrets in the form of photographs of secret-sacred ceremonies sold to a German magazine, *Der Stern*. The ensuing controversy, the stress caused by the public outrage over sacrilege expressed by national Aboriginal leaders, probably killed him.

And I am intrigued by John's spin on the story, which admittedly only takes up a few pages near the beginning of this book, which is a biography, rather, of his grandparents and particularly his grandmother, Frieda. While acknowledging that his father was collecting myths and songs (and ceremonial objects – *tjurunga*) against the possibility that Aranda tradition would one day revive and the younger generation would want their material returned; and that when that time came and the political situation was ripe for redress, T.G.H. failed to do what he had intended, John's major criticism seems to be that his father made out that his achievements were all his own. ('It was part of my father's psychological make-up to

need to be “the only one who knew”.) And to be honest, I tended to believe this too; that Ted Strehlow came virtually from nowhere, was the only one trusted, that his was the Herculean heroic effort built on no-one else’s; that in fact he was an only child. I didn’t quite grasp that he had siblings who were taken back to Germany in 1910. I did *know* this, but had developed a convenient amnesia about it. That is, until I read this book, which proves that T.G.H. was not the only great Strehlow.

The Tale of Frieda Keysser reveals that in 1908, the year John’s father Ted Strehlow was born, his 36 year-old grandfather Carl had already completed with Rev. Johann Reuther the first translation of the New Testament into an aboriginal language, Dieri (one of the Lake Eyre languages), and was part way through his five-volume magnum opus *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (The Aranda and Loritja Tribes in Central Australia) - this, on top of arduous missionary duties. John’s grandmother Frieda had reversed the trend of infant mortality at Hermannsburg, the only place in Central Australia where the popular Darwinian theory that the aboriginal people were doomed was being challenged. These were considerable achievements that have barely been appreciated till now.

And there is plenty of drama in this story of the grandparents to match the Greek tragedy of Ted Strehlow’s life. For a start it really is a great love story. Carl proposed marriage to Frieda after only one meeting at Obersulzbach in southern Germany in 1892 when the young pastor was making farewell visits to relatives, and she didn’t see him again until three years later when he rowed out to meet her boat the *Gera*, anchored in St. Vincent Gulf off Adelaide. On the basis of their one meeting, she was prepared to follow him around the world and marry him. They married at Light’s Pass, South Australia on 25 September 1895 and she followed this man she’d fallen in love with at first sight 1,000 miles into the remote desert of Central Australia where they worked for the Aranda people, *in Gottes namen*, for the next few decades.

John calls their mission ‘a victory over death and despair in a bygone age’. At a time in the 19th century when most Europeans assumed aborigines were on a path to extinction and even sympathetic whites aimed only so high as to ‘soften the pillow of a dying race’, Carl and Frieda worked to make life better and statistically more likely. It’s common these days to say that missionaries destroyed traditional culture, but John asks if it was not sensible to try to stop, for example, post-ceremonial wife-swapping when it only helped spread syphilis. Carl avoided witnessing Aranda ceremonies, but their songs must have been sung to him in his home on the mission compound so that he could transcribe them and translate them in *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme*. And John tells of how Carl and Frieda eventually realised there were aspects of tradition that didn’t need to be changed and of their practical accommodations as when Carl decided that he would add to his considerable duties the doling out of food in the *esshaus* because he, as a white man, would not be bound by kinship obligations to share food with relatives who did not live in the mission community.

But John is unfashionable in taking a positive view of missionaries. In an interview in the *Alice Springs News* (14 Dec 2011), he has gone so far as to say that ‘the role of Christianity in Central Australia has been...an enormous positive thing...’ and I wouldn’t be surprised if some members of Australia’s intelligentsia will simply not read this book once they get a sniff of the fact that it doesn’t fit the prevailing ‘political correctness’. Yet, in his 1,028 pages John mounts a fairly powerful argument. And to be fair, he does not fail to relate the really beautiful aspects of Aranda belief and culture. “Such an enchanted landscape these Aranda lived in,” he says towards the end of the book and he’s not being ironic, “spirit-beings

everywhere; invisible, but throbbing with latent potential.” I know exactly what he means. I’ve spoken in a previous blog about the way Aranda people (indeed other Central Australian people like the Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri), even to this day, live as if with the characters of their mythical age all around them. As I wrote in *Considering the aboriginal land of Altjira*: “...commissioners in Aboriginal Land Claims have commented on their difficulty in working out sometimes whether a witness is citing a forebear or a mythological figure.” And I suspect that John might concede that that world still exists (or co-exists) because we’ve both discussed how Aranda people will try to convert you to their worldview the minute you enter their country. The older generation today in fact practise ‘Both Ways’ – God’s way and Aranda way. They don’t tear themselves apart trying to reconcile the conflicts.

This book, however, is titled *The Tale of Frieda Keysser* and a big part of John’s mission is to restore his grandmother to the centre of the story. He is annoyed that she has been airbrushed from history and has even taken Andrew Schultz and me to task for omitting her from our interpretation of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. To be fair, we did ask the Sydney Symphony if they could see their way to paying for a soprano soloist, but I admit we didn’t fight very hard when they refused; I was concentrating on portraying a relationship between Theo and his father, Carl, who would soon be replaced in Theo’s affections (at least in my interpretation) by the old aboriginal men, in this case represented by Njitiaka. Another major reason for John’s focus was the discovery of Frieda’s diary (at least a discovery for him; his uncle knew it existed). Here was an invaluable alternative source of information on life in Central Australia in those early years. John had to teach himself the old German script to read it.

And that is only one example of his salvaging forgotten accounts from history. Because the book is rich with German background. Not only richly-informative hitherto-unpublished accounts of journeys by people like Johannes Flierl or Reuther (“...the only living things were the flies. We heard no bird calls, even the crows which live almost everywhere were no longer to be seen”), but taking Frieda’s family’s story back to where it all began, in Franconia, southern Germany in 1554 (or perhaps 50 years earlier) when her family, the Keyssers, established a hammer mill on the river Oelsnitz.

Some people will wonder why John needed to go this far back, and why the book has to be so long. These 1,000-odd pages are actually only volume 1, taking the grandparents’ story up to 1910, the first holiday back home in Germany (neatly, the book begins with John’s own visit to snowbound Germany in 1976). Volume 2 will take us to Carl’s death at Horseshoe Bend, south of Hermannsburg, on the family’s way home to Germany for only the second time in nearly 30 years. Surely, the scale of the story demands this commitment and John says early on that “Some people have said the book should be heavily cut ‘because we don’t need all these details’....But we do not know [these details] or we would not be where we are....We do not need more heavily edited, formula-written books...”

I know that one of John’s goals with this book is to “bring about a fundamental shift in Australian culture, to introduce a sea-change in the way Australians – especially Australian men – think about themselves, the way they live their lives, their relationship to the land and its aboriginal people” [email to me, 27 June 2012]. What does he mean? He rails in places at “pattern thinkers”, people who try to draw a picture before all the facts are in, people like the famous anthropologist Baldwin Spencer who, John thinks, shelved facts that didn’t fit with the conclusions he’d already drawn. The consequences of such thinking, he believes, have been dreadful, people living in squalor with no hope of economic advancement because the latest theory (since the 1970s) has been that tradition is a panacea for all ills. There have

been a few other voices lately (I can think of Peter Sutton's) sounding a warning about the dangers of such thinking.

From a personal point of view, however, I find the starting way back in Germany overwhelming and exhilarating; a huge weight has been hurtled forward by the time we get to Carl and Frieda in the desert. We get a good sense of the reasons for how they responded to this challenging environment and the reasons why they stuck it out, enduring the *Heimweh!* And I have an even more strongly reinforced sense of one of those aspects of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* that initially attracted me to the subject as a Conservatorium-trained European born in Australia – about the “culture [brought] from Europe and... grounded in Central Australia”.

The other great impression this amount of detailed canvas creates is of a huge Whitmanesque or Wagnerian epic sweep that has originated in this mere fleshing out of stories told at home in the Adelaide suburbs. Because this exploration of family lore ends up covering nearly everything I ever heard about in Central Australian history when I was living in Alice Springs – the Burke and Wills expedition (because they came close to Bethesda, the Dieri mission Carl was originally posted to), the Horn Expedition, the meeting of Spencer and Gillen, the Swan and Taplin enquiry, the great 1896 *Engwura* festival, the massacre at Irbmangkara, the arrest for murder of Mounted Constable Willshire (I lived on ‘Willshire Street’!!), the conversion of Moses Tjalkabota... Why John even goes into almost-expert detail on Sidney Kidman's horse sales, management of cattle stations and the operations of medieval hammer mills! Thank God this book was not edited.

And thank God, also, it is leavened by John's characteristic humour. Anyone who has read Ted Strehlow's books or Barry Hill's *Broken Song*, his biography of Ted Strehlow, will know that T.G.H.S., had a heavy burden of melancholia. Perhaps John's humour is a compensation for the hardness of Strehlow hands (father and grandfather). John mentions his uncle Hermann who did not come home after 1945, and of how his mother, Bertha would always say, “How lucky you are to have a father”. Finally, in Gunzenhausen in 1976, says John, he would get to meet his cousin Rainer, “and see for myself if I was so much luckier by having a father.”

The humour is one reason, but one reason only, why I think John is a finer writer than T.G.H.S. Ted Strehlow had great flights of imagination, particularly in nature description (or in footnote asides!), but John's writing is more consistent and stylish. He is greatly eloquent. Few have better conveyed the isolation Carl and Frieda must have felt; Carl spending his first months at Hermannsburg before Frieda arrived, the only German speaker in a 28 days' horse-riding radius. Or this passage which expresses Frieda's anguished longing for the climate of her birth:

“Despite the three inches of rain, the Finke did not flood. She longed to see it flood again, because until that happened, the water in the well would stay salty and they would be unable to grow vegetables in their garden. Thanks to Wettengel's dam holding back earlier floods, it was years since the garden had flourished, years since they had had water that was sweet in the mouth once the rainwater tanks ran dry. She longed for something other than the never-ending dryness, the sparse, burnt-off, ascetic harshness of her desert life. She wanted luxuriance, growth, a sense of plenty. Life in the desert was one endless struggle. A struggle, to which there was no end – unless, of course, one simply got out and left. That was the only hope. To leave, and never return.”

Or if I may just quote one favourite slab about Ted/Theo (particularly the second paragraph here):

“He was a romantic of the Hermann Hesse variety, and could not accept his father [Carl]’s attempts to civilise the Aranda, for what Theo loved about them was their ‘wildness’. In a telling passage in *Songs [of Central Australia]* he refers to Carl’s Loritja informant Talku giving him his rich lore. ‘And then he disappeared again one day into the free wild life of his own country’.

“Ah those yearnings, those pangs of unsated *Wuestenliebe*, those memories of campfires quickly covered over with a shovelful of sand as his camel teams rose groaning from their knees to move off across the desert – these were the hankerings in Theo’s soul which no amount of patient study ever could requite, for he never arrived at the end of all his searching and always there was still one more Old Man living beyond the furthestmost line of sandhills with secret couplets indentured on his soul...”

Secrets couplets indentured on his soul – boy, that gives you a sense of the eternal appeal and allure of the Strehlow project.

Of course there are villains in this piece. Wettengel, the fellow-pastor at Hermannsburg for the years 1901-06, who seems to have become quite unhinged, even poisoned and made poisonous, by the isolation. And Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer (the other half of that pioneering anthropological duo, Spencer and Gillen), who seems to have done effective work in burying Carl’s achievements, disparaging Carl as untutored, not much above the rank of a peasant.

I didn’t realise until I read this book just how much discussion there was about the Aranda in British academia in the 19th century. Much of it centred around the meaning of ‘Altjira’. I defined ‘altjira’ in the program booklet for *Ingekata* (the workshop opera on Ted Strehlow performed at the Adelaide Festival in 2008) as ‘a substratum of creativity that has underpinned life from the beginning and continues even today’; it’s the realm from which things come into being, and Ted Strehlow himself described it as ‘eternal, uncreated’, elsewhere as ‘always from always’ or ‘eternity’. But observers such as Carl claimed that Altjira was a conception of God. Spencer pooh-poohed. Carl’s informants are missionary aborigines, he said, who have been corrupted (whose pure information has been degraded) by association with Christian ideas. Even Spencer’s collaborator, Gillen, somehow ignored (pressured by Spencer?) evidence he’d found of an altjira-like God elsewhere in Central Australia. This all became a massive debate with thinkers like Oxford’s E.B. Tylor and Andrew Lang weighing in on opposing sides, evidence drawn in from eastern Australia, etc... John’s extensive reconstruction of this ‘punch-up’ forced me to realise that Central Australia was one of the great theatres of intellectual debate in the 19th century.

But Spencer does not come across as the most honourable of men in all of this discussion. And you could think John was ‘down’ on him (Spencer does shape up as a kind of *bête noir* in Strehlow family writing). Except that John is fantastic about giving credit where it’s due. He once said to me, privately, “Spencer – there was a beautiful writer”. And if you look at one of the double page spreads that opens this book, you’ll see something which gives a clue to the generosity of John’s writing. That double page spread contains a list of names. They’re shown against the background of a photograph of Hermannsburg. It is clear that this list is a

detail from a much larger and, I would bet, comprehensive list. I see names of people who figure in the story such as Mounted Constable Ernest Cowle, MC South, Tatararintja (Katharina) (for John's book is also exceptional in giving name and as much biographical shape as possible to the aboriginal players). I'm sure if our eye could run off the page we'd see Wettengel and Spencer. John dedicates his book "to the good ship Hermannsburg and all who sailed in her". Like a good dramatist (like a good Shakespearean, whose plays John has directed for many years) he loves all his characters.

I can't recommend this book too much. Energy leaps off every page (the dramatist again). It is a magnificent, sprawling, yet disciplined epic but you could dip into any sequence of pages and find things you'd never thought of before. This is a book that will sit on (and help take up) a shelf in my library next to *Die Aranda-und-Loritja Stämme* (when I buy it), *Songs of Central Australia*, *Aranda Traditions*, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, (I might slip in Spencer and Gillen's *Native Tribes of Central Australia* as loyal opposition) and Barry Hill's *Broken Song* as contemporary tribute to a great Australian family of writers.

Gordon Kalton Williams, © 2012

John Strehlow's website is <http://www.strehlow.co.uk>. The book is available from him or the

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