

CARL STREHLOW (1871 - 1922)

Carl Strehlow was born and educated in Germany. He studied theology and graduated in 1891. At the request of Christians in South Australia, he came to South Australia to be a minister to the German migrants there.

After he arrived, he worked for another German missionary, JG Reuther, who ran the Bethesda Mission at Killalpaninna among the Dieri Aborigines near Cooper's Creek, South Australia. He helped Reuther translate the New Testament into the Dieri language.

In 1894 Carl was asked to head the Finke River mission at Hermannsburg in Central Australia, in order to minister to the Western Aranda and Loritja peoples. He worked there for the next 28 years, until his death.



In addition to protecting the indigenous people from squatters and policemen, he acknowledged their spirituality. Strehlow recognised the need to understand the culture of those to whom he wished to minister, and he grew to be an authority on Central Australian Indigenous people and their languages. To them, Strehlow became 'ingkata' - a trusted leader and teacher. He became fluent in Dieri, Aranda and Loritja languages and compiled an Aranda dictionary. He also translated extracts of the Old Testament into Aranda. His greatest achievement was his work on the myths, legends, culture and customs of the Aranda and Loritja people, in 7 volumes. It challenged the idea that aboriginal people were doomed to die out in a process of Darwinian evolution based on inferior and superior races. As he published mostly in German his work was not fully recognised in Australia for quite some time.

His wife wrote of him:

'My husband always tried to exemplify the Christian life to his people. For their sake he denied himself many ordinary privileges. When the people were sent 'bush' every Wednesday to hunt and look for their own food, we likewise went on foot, taking our kitchen staff with us and eating the simplest of food. When at times the people had to be short-rationed, my husband deliberately abstained from the luxury of afternoon coffee or from smoking a favourite cigar. He drank a glass of wine only when we had important guests. And he suffered a lot from insomnia.'

He was apparently a strict authoritarian and very disciplined. Though he was firm, he was fair and tempered justice with mercy. His word was his bond, and that gained him love and respect. When he once threatened to expel an old woman for some misdemeanour, she replied she wouldn't go - she loved him too much.

During his ministry at Hermannsburg he performed 160 baptisms, 18 marriages, 56 burials and 23 confirmations. He translated the New Testament and preached on every chapter of it.

In 1922 he became desperately ill. He set out for Adelaide to receive medical treatment, but he never made it. He died on 20 October at Horseshoe Bend and was buried there. He remains one of Australian anthropology's greatest scholars.

A sequel to his death was the great spiritual upsurge among the Aboriginal people of Central Australia that followed. Word went around that if Strehlow was prepared to die for his faith, there must be something in the Christian religion. The next years became the 'golden age of Hermannsburg', with evangelism spreading out in every direction and many Aboriginal people converted to the Christian faith.