

## Bush Telegraph

A room at the Alice Springs telegraph station, circa 1896. Equipment of the period is making sounds: dots and dashes. Frank Gillen puts a chair in the doorway and lights a pipe. The patrician, albeit friendly, voice of Baldwin Spencer sounds, far away. Gillen, we notice is well attuned to the professor's line of thought.

Spencer      We haven't got to the bottom of this yet ...

Gillen        A little more work and we'll have the problem solved. There's tucker in it for the blacks, without any risk ...

Constable Ernest Cowle enters, with a scornful look on his face.

Gillen        You're off, Cowle? I'm sorry to see you go.

Cowle        I'll come back when I hear the corks popping. When one of your wretched mines comes good ...

Gillen        Don't wait that long my boy. Riches are only good if you've got something to waste them on.

Amelia Gillen enters.

Amelia        Waste! That's the theme, when you two get together.

Cowle        I'm not wasting my life up here. I'm where I want to be.

Amelia        Is emptiness the only meaning, then, Ernest Cowle? What do you say to that?

Cowle        The same as your husband. It looks empty when you arrive, and then you learn to see.

Amelia looks at Gillen.

Gillen        He's a wretch, my love. He knows I think the same.

Amelia        (scornfully) Emptiness! Who wants to be away from their people? I know, the two of you are made that way.

She leaves. Cowle and Gillen shake hands.

Cowle        Let me know if you hear anything from the Prof. I look forward to showing him around ...

Gillen        Strange how we miss him. Without him, this place wouldn't be worth living in.

Cowle leaves. Gillen sits again, with his pipe. We hear, again, the sound of the telegraph, and then, very faintly at first, the distant sounds, sometimes chanting, sometimes conversation, of people speaking in the Arrernte language. Gillen, who understands the language, attends keenly, nodding and commenting occasionally.

Gillen        (suddenly alarmed) One of their elders? Betty!

A black woman comes in, and not far behind her, Amelia Gillen.

Gillen        Man been killed for showing us ... things. (It's a question.)

Betty        Old men say he done wrong.

Amelia        What did he do, Betty?

Betty        Show Mister Cowle what only proper men allowed to see.

Gillen Tjuringa ...

Betty flinches. Amelia takes her by the hand.

Amelia Sorry. We won't say that again.

Betty (wanting to go) I know nuthin about it.

Gillen Okay Betty, sorry to upset you. (Betty goes, and he speaks to his wife.) They are so different, and every time we try to find out, we clash with their laws.

Amelia Wait until they tell you something. They've got all the time in the world, you've noticed that.

Gillen They made the Prof and I wait for hours before they took us to their camp.

Amelia That might have been an honour, Frank.

Gillen They're so poor and yet so rich. They've got endless space and time.

The voices are talking again, in a different language this time.

Gillen Kaititja. Nothing stirring them, I hope.

Then it's the turn of the telegraph to make sounds, and Gillen and his wife watch and listen.

Gillen The government's talking to London. As usual, and all the time. You'd think we knew our own minds by now.

Amelia (with gentle sarcasm) Ask the Prof.

She leaves, and Gillen picks up his pen, and writes.

Gillen This killing upsets me terribly. I would not have had it happen for a hundred pounds, and I am going to

write to Cowle, there must be no more robberies. I can only say that I accepted when in ignorance of what they meant to the natives. To realise this one needs to go as I did a few weeks ago with bush natives and watch them reverently handling their treasures. It impressed me far more than anything else I have witnessed.

Spencer There's no compromise available. They control knowledge every step along the way. We say a thing's not known until it's in the open. How does anyone get around that? (He looks about him.) Frank? Paddo? Cowle?

Cowle (out of sight) Who cares? If it's us or them, it's us!

Paddo You've got me in a box there, Professor.

Gillen I wish I knew ...

Amelia (at the door) If the Prof can't solve the problem, how can you? Frank? It's the problem that comes from living here.

Gillen You love it as much as I do.

Amelia And yet I love other things more ...

Gillen You'll never admit that this (sweeping gesture of the hands) is normal.

Amelia It used to be for the black people. We should have left them as they were.

The sound of aboriginal voices, chanting, talking, arguing, fills the Gillens' home and there is also the clap-clap-clap of sticks. As it dies away, the sounds of the telegraph take over again, relentlessly,

though quietly too. Then there is silence, and we see Cowle and a blacktracker; Cowle has a rifle. They are following tracks through rocky ground. This involves frequent stops, with the tracker, Tommy, moving in wide circles to pick up the tracks again. The two men move silently, communicating for the most part only by simple gestures. There is the continuing background sound of aboriginal voices, sometimes many, sometimes only two. There is also a plodding measure to indicate the relentlessly determined nature of Cowle's enterprise. He is respectful of Tommy for his skills but maintains his superiority as the white police officer.

Cowle (of the tracks) How old?

Tommy Yesty. This time.

Cowle points to a cleft in the range, to one side of them.

Tommy They take a rest.

Cowle After six days on the run, yes.

Tommy (also pointing) Sleep away a bit.

Cowle Where? That's the question.

Tommy Where they see us coming ...

Cowle Friday, he's the one I want. (He proposes an idea.) You come this way, I go around the back. They see you, they sneak behind that range, they find me. (He pats the gun over his shoulder.) You bring up the chains.

Tommy (not liking this idea) I stay with you.

Cowle (looking up) No moon.

Tommy Come up tomorrow, when they sleep.

Cowle That's our moment. For now, we sleep too.

Tommy (watching Cowle) One blanket man.

Cowle You can't catch bad blackfellas unless you're as good in the bush as they are.

Tommy These fellas not much good. Too cocky. Think they got rid of us.

Cowle I mightn't have much to live for but I can track a man ...

He takes the rifle off his shoulder and points it with considerable intensity.

Tommy They be silly if they run away.

Cowle It would be simple if they did. We wouldn't have to drag them in to the Alice. What a lot of bother.

He lies down on the bare ground and Tommy does the same. The aboriginal voices give way to night noises, and the ticking of time, then the moon rises. Cowle and Tommy get up, and disappear. The Alice Springs telegraph station reappears, and Gillen takes up his position near the door, writing, and smoking, but we hear Cowle talking to the blacks he's captured.

Cowle What's your name?

Voice Warlpiril.

Cowle I'm calling you Thursday. Friday, get over there. (angrily) You want a bullet? Get over there. Go ahead Tommy. (The click of handcuffs, the clatter of a chain.) Now the other fellow. (The same sounds.) Big walk ahead of us boys. The Alice. It would have been easier if you hadn't run.

We see Cowle, Tommy the tracker and two prisoners advancing on a building at the telegraph station. Gillen's waiting for them.

Gillen (of Friday) This man's the smartest of his tribe.

Cowle Nobody's all that smart with a gun pointed at them.

Gillen The case'll only take a minute. After that, I've got hundreds of things to ask him.

Cowle Poor bastard. He's looking forward to jail, and he's getting you.

Gillen Shut up Cowle. You brought him in. Now it's up to me. You listening Friday? You kill cattle belong Tempe Downs. Yes or no?

Friday Fockin lubra bin make me kill cattle.

Gillen You can't blame your lubra. You get six months in jail.

Friday (cheerfully) Port Augusta?

Gillen That's right. Port Augusta jail.

Friday They feed me three time a day!

Cowle Cheeky bastard's right. We should chain'em to a log.

Gillen Quiet please. (to Friday) Before we send you to jail, you have to answer questions. (He pulls out a clip of papers.)

Cowle Oh Christ, Frank!

Gillen I'm in charge here, Mounted Constable Cowle. If you don't want to listen, go and ask Amelia for a cup of tea.

Cowle A good offer, but I'll listen.

Gillen Okay Friday, tell me the name of your father.

Friday (being smart) Tuesdi.

Gillen (grinning) Loritja name.

Friday Blackfella business. Not allowed to say.

Gillen Bullshit! I've got the name here. And your grandfather's name. I want to check the names of all your kin. I'm going to read'em out. You tell me if I've got'em right. Okay? Here we go ...

He starts to read a list of names, but Friday faints, reeling against blacktracker Tommy, who's attached by a chain to Friday. Tommy eases Friday to the ground.

Gillen Sal volatile! Quickly, love! The bugger's fainted!

Amelia brings in a bottle and Gillen tries to pour some of its contents down Friday's neck. Cowle is hugely amused.

Cowle The Centre's holy terror! The terror's holy centre! Gillen, Francis James!

Gillen Shut up, Cowle, bugger you. Get a bucket and pour it on him if you want to be useful.

Cowle I don't. I want to be a useless prick!

Gillen That's exactly what you are, unless you've got a black woman in your camp.

Cowle I haven't.

Gillen That's what you always say.

Cowle Then it's always sacred true.

Gillen Sacred! What's that mean? I wish the Prof was here.

Cowle	(pointing at Friday) This fella's as sacred as the Prof. And bloody smart! He fainted when he saw those questions!	Gillen	Stretched out on the floor.
Gillen	(calling) Darling? Make us a cup of tea?	Cowle	If there's an inquest, Frank, I will prove to the magistrate's satisfaction that I got him here with a tummy full of breakfast. The prisoner was delivered in first class condition!
Amelia	(from nearby) Won't be long Frank. You keep Ernest talking ...	Gillen	(as Amelia enters with a tray) Thank you darling.
Gillen	(disgusted, powerless) Nobody ever stopped him, as far as I know ...	Amelia	(looking at Friday) Aren't you going to do anything?
Cowle	Good job I live at Illamurta, don't you think, Frank? You wouldn't want me in here.	Cowle	It's already been done. Undoing it is quite a problem.
Gillen	What am I going to tell the Prof? I've made a bloody mess. (He looks at the body of Friday, lying on the ground.) Cowle?	Amelia	I never know what you're talking about, Ernest.
Cowle	(taunting) Whatever you say, I'll tell him something different.	Gillen	Neither does he.
Gillen	There's always two sides ... or four or five ...	Cowle	(in good humour) Ask the Prof ...
Cowle	Everything's relative, you like to think. But what about right and wrong?	Gillen	(almost supplicatory) My dear Spencer ...
Gillen	(sullenly) What about them?	Spencer	(far away, but curious) They seem not to have had mental disorders. Freud would hardly have landed a blow on them. This must mean that behaviours we don't allow were somehow incorporated in their systems. Our minds cling to what's lawful and try to hold other things at bay. They're more accepting ...
Cowle	(pointing to Friday) You couldn't frighten him with Port Augusta. But when you started to probe him for who he was, he had the sense to pass out straight away.	Gillen	... because they've got things worked out so finely ...
Gillen	You don't think he's faking?	Spencer	They give themselves time to think.
Cowle	You wake him up if you can. He's not faking. He didn't like it, Frank. You want to know things you're not supposed to know. Who knows what is very important to these people.	Cowle	They govern themselves, instead of experts governing fools.
		Gillen	And yet they're only stone age people ...
		Spencer	We believe in evolution, Frank: it may be a clever way of deceiving ourselves.

Cowle You don't have to be clever to do that. I've got friends who do it all the time.

Gillen (to Amelia) Lock the door next time you see him coming, would you darling?

Amelia He's the half of your own mind that you don't like to hear.

Cowle I don't like to hear it myself. We're a little island of fools, telling ourselves we're clever. Ah, Friday! Welcome back to the world.

Friday (grunting) Ugh! (to Cowle) You taking me down to Port Augusta?

Cowle Port Augusta is too civilised for the likes of me. We'll keep you here until we've got a few men for jail, then we'll send a couple of troopers. Oodnadatta, then the train.

Friday What about my mate?

Cowle He'll stay here for a week, on rations, then we'll let him go. We don't have a case against him. (laughing) Bring him back something nice.

Friday My people reckon I'm boss cocky when I get out of jail.

Gillen Have a cup of tea, Friday. (then, hastily) Drink it out of the cup.

Friday slurps some tea in ghastly fashion.

Cowle There's room for a finishing school, up here. Manners, deportment, keeping your daughters nice!

He leaves, signalling to Friday that he's to follow. Friday looks scornfully on the Gillens, and he goes.

Spencer The study of mankind is endless. But accepting what we see ... that's another matter.

His last words are overtaken by another burst of language – one of the central Australian languages spoken quietly but insistently, from both close and far away, and then, much closer, the sounds of the telegraph sending messages to London and back. After a time a new element is added to the 'background' noises – a list of things the 1901-1902 expedition will need to take with them. The list is read and/or added to in the voices of Gillen, Amelia, Spencer, Harry Chance, and two black men, Purunda and Erlikialika, with Spencer first, then the others in quick rotation.

List Camp oven, one. Enamel mugs, four. Billy cans, assorted, three. Enamel dining plates, six. Ditto, small, six. Butchers knives two. One steel. Two tin openers. Quart pots, with strainers, three. One grid iron. One short handle shovel. Tomahawk, one. Six assorted bits for brace. Assorted bolts, three pounds. One screw wrench. One hand saw. Knives, forks and spoons ...

Spencer This may be the last opportunity to discover how the black man lived before the white man interrupted his traditional way of life. Already the incursions of station properties have changed traditional practice in so many ways. Take fire; it's easy to start with matches. Kerosene. But when the black people learn

from us, they lose something of their own.

List Twenty four pairs of hobbles. Twenty five spare hobble rings. Two side lines, two belts. Straps for same. (after a brief pause) Double barrelled gun, twelve bore. One hundred and fifty cartridges for Chance's rifle ...

Amelia So many guns?

Gillen There's fishing line and traps on the list for the same reason. We have to be able to get fresh food.

Amelia You could hunt like the natives ...

Gillen We're doing that, in a modern sort of way.

There is the sound of a shot, and the excited yells of Purunda and Erlikialka as a bird is brought down.

Purunda Pluck him! Put'im on the fire. I dig a hole!

Spencer Good one, Harry! Well done.

Purunda 'fessa man, you shoot another. One each plenty good tucker!

Spencer I'm too slow. They don't wait around for me.

Purunda Erlikialka hide in swamp, shoot birds quick fire, you give him gun.

Gillen Spencer, tell Harry to give him the gun, unless he's prepared to hide in the swamp himself.

Chance No fear! Too many mozzies. Here y'are Likialka, you shoot'em duck.

Amelia Boys, boys ... what makes boy children men?

Spencer Science, Mrs Gillen, that's what does the trick. Without it we'd be lost.

Amelia So what are you going out to find?

Spencer The ways of a vanishing people; that's the simple answer.

Amelia And what else have you in that lofty mind?

Spencer I'm not lofty Amelia. We live in one of the hardest countries on earth. The black people did it so simply, they put us to shame. They needed so little, yet their adjustment was fine. We want to know how they did it. It wasn't only water and food, though they were masters there. It's in the spirit, and their stories, that you learn what they are.

Amelia Do you go to study, Professor Spencer, or to learn?

Spencer I tell the university I'm going to study, and they give me leave. I tell Frank I'm here to learn, and you know, I think, I learn more from him than I do from anyone else.

Amelia He loves you for that, Professor. He needs the black people. He talks as if he's looking down, but he's looking out. They're the horizon for him, and the ground at his feet. They're here and now, and they're beyond.

There's the sound of another shot, and Gillen's voice, calling.

Gillen Another one, Harry?

Chance That wasn't us, Frank. It was at a waterhole, the other side of the range.

Gillen Those bloody cattle men, taking water for their animals ...

Spencer Do you need to stay a few days, Frank? We can always delay our start ...

Gillen (miserably) No. Let's go ahead. (reading again from their list) Half a dozen yards of towelling for the cook. (The other voices join him, or they alternate, as the litany struggles on.) One five gallon keg. Three enamel pie dishes. Leather for washers. Three leather punches. Frying pans, two. One long iron fork ...

Spencer (joyfully) Toasting!

List (continuing) Six water bags. One small steel bar, three feet long. One shoeing hammer. Chance to take his own brace, pincers, pliers and rifle. Point 45 Colt revolver. Two hundred cartridges for same.

Amelia Guns! All these guns and bullets!

Gillen We have to hunt. There's got to be fresh food!

There is another shot, and this time the aboriginal voices which have been lurking around this final scene become troubled, wailing, full of grief, and they continue in this way until the end.

Amelia Travel well, my love. Travel well, professor. Harry, boys, God keep you in his care! (She watches for a while, then disappears.)

Spencer Gillen has been out this afternoon getting photos of scenery that I want, and is at present trying to recover from the exertion of having climbed a hill. Of course a blackfellow carried his camera but Frank is cross with him because he took him up a rather steep way ...

Gillen Cowle arrived in the evening, looking more like a Greek bandit than a police officer. His belt is laden with cartridges, revolver and handcuffs and altogether he looked formidable. He is disgusted to find that the expedition does not keep a supply of whisky on hand, and indulges in scathing remarks about our parsimony. A very pleasant evening spent in reminiscing and telling yarns ...

Spencer Today has been rather an exciting one and we have been kept on the go all the time. First of all we called in the assistance of one of the few women who were not under the ban of silence and we had a long tussle with her as to the different names she gives to different members of the tribe. It was a severe mental effort for her and I don't think we have got them all right yet but she is now resting after her work and we shall try and settle the matter tomorrow ...

Gillen The blacks say that in the Alcheringa, the far back time when people changed from animals or plants into men, two men of the Eaglehawk (Irritcha) totem killed and ate a number of men, women and children of the same totem, filling themselves very full until they became sick. The heap of stones now covered by twigs represents the vomit and from this an evil influence is thrown off. To prevent the evil magic, which is called Arungquiltha, from escaping, every passer-by, man, woman or child, must add a twig ...

Spencer Gillen and I have been practising rifle shooting with fair success for amateurs. Crocodiles upon the northern rivers will have to beware when we get near to them. Gillen promised the Moonta people to take them back one which he had shot. I fancy he will have to buy a stuffed one in Port Darwin and then shoot it on the quiet ...

Gillen We are now in the country of Walunkwa. (The aboriginal voices press closely on Gillen's words, almost bursting through.) The great hole at Wearminni was formed by him from here to his place of origin at Thapaurla. We follow his tracks. When within sight of the great waterhole the blacks warned us not to mention the snake's name otherwise it might become angry and issue forth and destroy us. We assured them we had the greatest respect for the snake and indeed we have and we were most careful not to disobey their injunction. We were most impressed by the reverence shown by the natives who accompanied us and I must confess that to a certain extent I shared in their feelings. Our visit to Thapaurla will live long in our memories. We have taken a number of pictures of the young men being rubbed with the sacred Irratitcha. 'Tis a glorious moonlight night and the surrounding crags are lit up by the blacks' fire. Our visit to Thapaurla and various places en route has been most interesting and profitable. We should much like to see more of the wildly picturesque

Murchison Ranges but time is fleeting and even a day cannot be spared to mere sightseeing ...

Gillen's voice is rich in happiness and fulfilment but the cost of this happiness should be evident in the voices of the black people which are the background of the thoughts he's expressing.

In writing this libretto I have drawn heavily on *My Dear Spencer: the letters of F.J.Gillen to Baldwin Spencer* by John Mulvaney, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997, and *From the frontier: outback letters to Baldwin Spencer*, by the same authors, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000. Another influence in the development of my sense of aboriginal languages surrounding white settlers was Barry Hill's *Broken Song: T.G.H.Strehlow and aboriginal possession*, Knopf/Random House Australia, Sydney, 2002. Thanks are due also to my daughter, Miriam Eagle, who took me to the Centre, including the Alice Springs telegraph station, in 2001.