



**Possession, dispossession,
what about re-possession?**

Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal possession by Barry Hill

Chester Eagle



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TGH (Theo, or sometimes Ted) Strehlow had an upbringing which made him close to unique. He was the son of German missionaries at Hermannsburg, west of Alice Springs. The mission was built on the land of the Aranda people (variously spelt as Arunta, Arrernte and so on; I'm following Barry Hill here), and the boy grew up with Aranda children around him. He spoke Aranda, quite literally, like a native. He spoke German with his parents, and English to all and sundry, making him trilliterate from the beginning. The black people seemed to think of him as one of them, while he ...

... went on to a troubled life, with a mixture of success and failure, rarely finding peace with himself and the world, unless it was in his early years of manhood, when he was travelling through vast reaches of Aranda country, on camels, accompanied by Tom Ljonga, his mentor and guide, meeting native groups, and collecting. It was a harsh life, but the Aranda were used to it, and so, in his own way, was he. He knew that the ways of the Aranda were breaking down, and that the amazing completeness of their world-view, the extraordinary way in which they brought mythic time into fusion with present time, was not always being handed on. Initiation rites were left unperformed, often because men felt contempt for their successors, who, after contact with the world of the settler-whites, no longer had fear and respect for their elders. New forces were breaking into the once-complete world of the

Aranda, nothing would ever be the same again, and he, Strehlow reckoned, was recording and collecting in a sunset-time. Nobody would ever see again the things that he knew about, because the rituals, the performances, the songs and dances, were being forgotten. Not handed on. He, he knew, had a rare opportunity to gather the mysteries of a way of life in the moments before it was gone.

If we turn from the young Strehlow, back in Central Australia after doing well at Adelaide University, to the ageing man, living in Adelaide again, with a second wife, and estranged from his first family, and if we then cast a glance at the nation surrounding him before we try to assess his achievements, we see that the native people, so crushed for so long, were beginning to stand up for themselves; we see, here and there, that the ways of the aboriginal peoples across the country were by no means as completely lost as Strehlow once thought; we see that dispossession (whites taking whatever they wanted) was giving way to native title claims on large areas of land, and that the white society which once swamped natives without mercy or comprehension, was now a little more disposed to hear what they were saying. TGH Strehlow lived from 1908 to 1978, and the world had changed around him, but Ted, as a few friends – he never had all that many – sometimes called him, had not kept up with change. The last chapter of Barry Hill's book shows us an embattled man struggling to operate in a world he didn't care for. Strehlow is not the sort of person who arouses

much sympathy– he’s too inclined to demand it for anyone, ever, to want to give it – but to look at him in his later years is to realise how much had happened to the society around him and how hard it was for him to adapt, once he’d been fully formed.

Let us go back to the beginning, now, and come forward again to that miserable time at the end, trying to balance not only the things that Strehlow was doing, and the forces struggling with each other inside him, but the changes slowly taking place in the surrounding society.

The beginning is at Hermannsburg, a Lutheran mission. At once we are in a world of ambivalence. Here’s Baldwin Spencer on the subject.

To attempt ... to teach them ideas absolutely foreign to their minds and which they are *utterly incapable of grasping* simply results in destroying their faith in the precepts which they have been taught by their elders and in giving them in return nothing which they can understand. *In contact with the white man the aborigine is doomed to disappear*: it is far better that as much as possible he should be left in his native state and that no *attempt should be made* either to cause him to lose faith in the strict tribal rules, or to teach him abstract ideas which are *utterly beyond the comprehension of an aborigine*.

Yet Carl Strehlow, Theo’s father, was much loved by the Aranda people at the mission, providing them with a haven relatively safe from the whites operating cattle stations in the area, and he in turn loved the people for whom he was caring – or so he thought. Strehlow senior and the other Lutherans felt it incumbent on them to learn as much as possible about the natives with whom they were

working. They felt that Christianity – *pace* Baldwin Spencer – had to be made comprehensible to the natives, and that, in turn, meant that the missionaries needed to know the beliefs, the understandings, that they were trying to lead people away from. The missionaries’ wish to understand their people was, then, a tactical move, but it still contained a fair measure of respect. Yet there were limits. Barry Hill on Strehlow senior:

... there was an absolute barrier to the flow of contact. His Christianity prevented him from going anywhere near the pagan ceremonies. The naked dances, the throbbing painted bodies of the ecstatic men in their initiation rituals, the spectacle of their celebration of totem, their union with nature, their simulations of procreation, their imaginative – no, their actual – entry into the erotic processes of the world at a celebratory level, without shame and with song, always with song – this he could not permit himself to face. He was compelled to withdraw, turn his back. More than that. He was doctrinally obliged to declare such ceremonies taboo. That was a condition for the privilege of settling at the mission and eating of its rations: that the pagan dances cease, that the pagan songs not be sung, on penalty of banishment from the mission refuge.

The sexual Puritanism of the Christian was at the heart of the matter ...

Theo, TGH Strehlow, was the youngest of six children. ‘The school at the mission was really for natives,’ Hill tells us. Carl Strehlow, and Frieda, his wife, decided to take their children to Germany and leave the first five with other members of the family.

This they did, in 1910-11, and when they returned to central Australia, they had only Theo, their youngest, with them. Carl Strehlow, the Lutheran pastor, never saw his first five children again; it was years before Frieda, their mother, was reunited with them, after her husband's death, when she felt Theo no longer needed her, and as for Theo, it was only after an even longer separation that he saw those of his siblings who were still alive. These separations were deepened by the animosities of two world wars, with Germany and Australia on opposing sides. Theo Strehlow, TGH, was never to feel an insider in the country of his birth. Life on a mission station was lonely, and surrounded by the resentment of cattle station operators who coveted the land 'wasted' on a mission, and scorned the hand-outs to lazy, useless blacks. There is a lovely moment in 'Journey to Horseshoe Bend' (I'm referring to Andrew Schultz's musical cantata based on Strehlow's memoir of the same name) in which Njitiaka says to the fourteen year old Theo, 'You one of us.' The child draws himself up to reply that he is his father's son; perhaps he was both, but neither was much help in giving him a feeling of belonging in the white society of his day, whether in Central Australia or in Adelaide. Besides, he was never initiated into Aranda society – that would have been unthinkable to his parents – and for that matter he was never exactly initiated into white society either.

So I began this essay by referring to TGH Strehlow's almost unique origins, a blend of German, Aranda and English-language Australian influences; these were the internal forces he had to deal with, and he was to find that they didn't always sit easily together.

Barry Hill takes Strehlow's ideas seriously, spending many pages on the complexities of his thought, the origins of his ideas and the ways his thinking and practice caused him to resemble, and to differ from, his father. I mentioned that Theo was never initiated in the Aranda way; it could also be said that his father, in dying when Theo was barely fourteen, deprived his son of the opportunity to work through their differences, to rebel where necessary, to make journeys far from the Hermannsburg homeland, to find places, activities, and people who developed him, affectionately and thoughtfully, in ways that weren't available to people on the mission.

A mission is a strange place to grow up. Hermannsburg was an energetic source of faith, certainly, but young Theo's position was made difficult by the powerful presence of his father. Barry Hill again:

Theo's idealisations of his father compound his distance from the actual man. 'The uncrowned king of Central Australia' – this from the much respected policeman of the region, Sergeant Stott. Strehlow reports this proudly, as well he might, since it makes of him a prince. *Ingkata*, ceremonial chief – this according to the Aboriginal congregation at the mission. There are other epithets: 'fearless white champion,' 'great Aboriginal father figure,' 'great rockplate.'

This is the father who died before the development of his final son – the only one still with him, in Australia – was completed. After Carl Strehlow was buried at Horseshoe Bend, Theo and his mother went to a German family in the Barossa Valley, then to Adelaide, and boarding school for the boy. Later, Frieda Strehlow

took on the role of matron at a co-educational school in Adelaide, and had Theo with her again, until he went to university, where he did well, but what the father took out of his life could never be replaced, except by Theo borrowing from the father's personality, struggling with it, doing the same things and doing different things, reaching his decisions after internal struggles because he rarely had friends to act as sounding boards and when he did he took little enough notice of what they suggested. It is as if the Aranda people, and the country that he knew almost as well as they did, were the resonances that he knew he had to respond to. One could never be certain of other advice or expectations because they were likely to be corrupted in some way. Impure. He was a man of the inland and others, based in the cities of the coast, or Canberra, lacking the knowledge that might rival his, could only produce ideas that worked against, or did little for, the people he felt had been entrusted to his care.

The first job of his adult life was as a Patrol Officer, a sort of disempowered policeman who was also a welfare officer, and the area he had to cover, a huge slice of Central Australia, had at its heart the Aranda people with whom he'd grown up as a boy. Before we look at this stage of his life, however, I want to step forward to the point in Barry Hill's book where Strehlow's unusual character is brought into sharp relief against three other men of the inland – Xavier Herbert, Ion Idriess and Bill Harney, three men with the gift of the gab, men who were rare in their place and time, but never doubted that they were in touch with the people around them, white or black.

These men, and the Hobart-born art teacher Olive Pink, took their bearings from the mixed-race people surrounding them. White men, they all knew, wanted to have black women, but when a white man had a white wife, it was unthinkable to imagine her taking a black man as a lover. If sex is seen as predatory, all the raids were by whites into the territory of blacks; sexual conquest repeated the taking of land in that the white man got his way regardless of the effects of his actions. The price was paid by the half-caste children, whose position in both the black world and the white world was insecure. There are many reasons for this, but the most obvious is the lack of social learning acquired by young half-caste people. If they lived in Central Australia they might drift in to Alice Springs (formerly 'Stuart') on the sandy Todd River, and their black role models were drunks, outcasts living from hand to mouth on wretched government rations, while their white role models were the sorts of men prepared – or forced, perhaps – to live far from the relatively cultivated cities of the coast. The half-caste was likely to be a de-cultivated person, knowing little of either culture, and certainly not the sustaining, life-giving strengths. Nonetheless, the half-caste could be a fine person. Ion Idriess:

I have had some splendid mates among the half-castes, men who were as well educated as I and as mentally alert. As to having 'guts', well, a half-caste mate has saved my life more than once. In war I have fought beside him, and seen him die with a smile on his face. And yet we won't give him a chance to make good. If he is trained to do good honest work, then he responds to that training as we all do. If he is decently educated, then his mental powers are developed for

a responsible job, just as ours are. City folk have no idea of the bitterness with which the half-caste regards the whites.

Bill Harney was a 'combo', a white man married to a mixed-blood woman; this caused him to lose the hospitality of many station owners, leading him to camp on riverbanks. His partner died of tuberculosis in Katherine hospital in 1932, leaving him with two young children. He had, Barry Hill tells us, bitter memories of who had helped and who had not. He also said, and this contrasts with Strehlow, 'To me the best stories in the bush are those which cannot be printed.' One can see in that statement an acceptance of situations as they existed, not as they were approved or deplored by those wanting to lead people to some form of respectability. The existence of mixed-race people showed that respectability had fallen down. Mixed-race people are a problem, but only if you think of them that way: they are also a considerable possibility. The problem of mixed-race people is that fully initiated blacks, on the one hand, and educated or half-educated whites, on the other, will look down on them, pushing them to the fringe of both cultures. I've brought Harney, Idriess and Herbert into my remarks because all three were content to take people, if you'll excuse the cliché, as they found them, to respond to people and situations out of their own feelings and not from an articulated policy.

Where does that leave Strehlow? In a missionary position, I would have to say. And, hostile as he may have been to Baldwin Spencer, he was to some extent in an anthropologist's position too. He loved the black people, he was able to love the black people, because he had something to offer them, and one of the reasons why

he loved the black people was that they had a good deal to offer him. He knew what they were like; he knew what they had been. Like his father, he would protect them. Indeed, he would go beyond his father in his understanding of the Aranda culture. He would collect their tales, their songs. He would record them chanting, and film them dancing. He would encapsulate them, in all their primitive magnificence, in the white man's understanding.

He would do what nobody had done to his satisfaction before. He would collect the multitude of verses which make up *Songs of Central Australia*.

You've never heard of it? Neither had I until I read Barry Hill's book in 2002. Many pages are spent on Strehlow's travels, collecting verses of the Aranda songs, and then on the extremely complex matters involved in translating. Here's Strehlow on translating:

This attempt to differentiate between the root meanings of poetical terms which have been used as synonyms in the songs brings out clearly one of the chief difficulties in translating aboriginal verse into English. The native love for parallelism introduces a host of poetic synonyms into aboriginal verse; and these poetic synonyms are differentiated in meaning by the associations and the imagery introduced by their root syllables. Many of these native roots have no exact equivalents in English, and have to be paraphrased extensively. The associations and the imagery conjured up by the native roots are frequently not identical with those conveyed by their English equivalents even where the basic import is the same. *The two languages do not 'cover' each other very well ...*

The very idea of translating derives from a confidence, a trust, perhaps, that there is enough in common between two cultures – Spanish and French, let us say – to allow the thinking of one to be moved across to the other. In my Spanish/French example, this is certainly possible. The two cultures are close enough in concepts and kind. The links between the two peoples' daily habits and their overarching framework of belief are both strong, and similar. If a Spaniard wishes to talk about transubstantiation, resurrection, redemption or some dissonance in the soul, she can do so with confidence that similar thoughts are entertained by French minds. It is a mistake, I think, to imagine that translation is a word for word undertaking: it is, of course, but, and also, it is not. In a long-established language, words reverberate against each other. Words call other words to mind. Words have been 'fixed' in their meanings by famous usages in the literature of which they form a part. 'To be or not to be; that is the question.' The languages of the world depended on their internal resonances long before anyone thought of dictionaries, or tried to build up a collection of definitions from aardvark to zymurgy. Translation is an attempt by someone who straddles both cultures to make the thinking of one available to people whose minds reside in the other. Normally, this is done as a page by page exercise, perhaps, in more difficult cases, it will be offered line by line. As if this is not complex enough, we must now take into our minds the considerable differences between oral and written traditions.

The Aranda didn't write. They remembered, they sang, and they danced. When they looked at the night sky, they didn't

think of galaxies or solar systems, they thought of ancestor beings, connected by stories to places on their own grounds. Their ceremonial life linked the two. To the European mind, observing them, it seemed that they had no regard for morality, the rules of right and wrong. They only had custom, and its moral base, if any, was not apparent to Europeans; hence the invaded people could be, and were, called savages. Since their system of thought was not apparent to the outsider, the outsider considered that it did not exist. It seems to me that Strehlow, in translating the songs of an ancient people, was trying at the same time to construct a lexicon whereby some equivalents – and non-equivalents, or impossible-equivalents – between Aranda and English could be related to each other. You could hardly have a translation of a song if the two languages, considered as underlying systems of thought, had not been brought within range of each other.

This may not have been possible, of course, because it implies that meanings are relatively fixed, and I wonder if that is the case in an oral tradition, especially one such as the Aranda's where the most intense and important meanings are made from a fusion of the contemporary and the original (the dreamtime) happenings. Barry Hill's account of Strehlow's translating makes it clear that many words in the songs were so old that they had dropped out of daily use among the Aranda people, and needed explanation from the senior men to the junior, in order that they could be understood. I say 'explanation'; this is close to 'translating', is it not? Something similar happens with the English language when people discover that they cannot understand Shakespeare, let us say. Nobody has

ever written English better than Shakespeare, he's had an immense and lasting influence on the language, yet for many people today he's only a figure (safely ignored by those who wish to) in the history of our language. I mention this matter of the loss of Shakespeare from modern minds as an example of language evolving over time, and I bring it to the reader in the context of Aranda thought, in which the original and the contemporary are brought together in ritual: found to be, because made to be, one and the same thing. If this was done, as we believe today, over sixty thousand years, it must have been that aboriginal thinking, both about the dreamtime – the *alcheringa* – and about the contemporary, must have evolved. It's another case of things being compelled to change in order to keep doing what they had always done. If I am correct in this line of reasoning, then it means that Aranda ceremonial was not a *representation* of something, but the means of making that thing *happen*. The nearest Christian, or modern European controversy I can think of over such a matter would be the argument over the communion service (the mass, to Catholics). Bread and wine are consumed. Do they 'represent' the body and blood of Christ, or *are* they the body and blood? As a young man, reading about this dispute, I thought it foolish, but now, thinking about the Aranda people, for whom the magical had not been brought under the control of science, the question takes on another life.

By and large, the Aranda, overpowered in almost every way, fell into despair. They stopped believing. Their systems of thought had broken down. The whitefellas couldn't be kicked out of what used to be Aranda country and even if it had been possible, the

fact would remain that they had been there, showing that another way of life was possible, one in which blackfella rules didn't work. Whitefellas could break the laws and get away with it. The blackfellas' belief systems, a vast and intricate network of ancient ritual, practice and prohibition, a carefully managed steps and stairs of initiation and control of secret knowledge, had crumbled. Every part of the ancient structure had supported every other part, and now there was nothing still holding. In the words of Chinua Achebe, a black man of a different continent, 'Things fall apart'.

This brings us to the *tjurunga*, the secret-sacred pieces of wood and stone which white men went looking for when the Territory was settled; which Strehlow collected, and which, late in his life, put him in increasingly stupid and offensive positions.

Let us return to the young TGH Strehlow, back in the centre after some years in Adelaide, at school and university; Strehlow the patrol officer, looking after the people whom he, at least as much as his father, liked to think of as his. Accompanied by Tom Ljonga, a Christianised Aranda, he moved through vast distances on camels, encountering small groups of natives here and there, getting them to sing him verses whenever they could be persuaded. The Aranda were impressed that Strehlow was not only interested, but understood. They appear to have thought that their dying traditions could be entrusted to an uninitiated white man, perhaps because he was that rarity among the invaders, someone who could ensure that the mystery of their tribal ways would endure if placed in his care. They began to give him their *tjurunga*.

It's almost impossible to explain this term, and it may well be that it's an untranslatable idea; suffice it to say that in an oral tradition, where most meanings emerged from or disappeared into ceremonial activities, the *tjurunga*, stones or carved pieces of wood, kept in places which only the senior men could visit, were almost the only physical embodiments – apart from the black people themselves – of identity and whatever needed to be concealed by mystery. Carl Strehlow was protective of the natives' absorption in their *tjurunga*, but Barry Hill describes Carl, the father, showing Theo, his son, a *tjurunga* and talking about it with him. This would have shocked the Aranda men, had they known, and it foreshadows the dreadful situation Theo got himself into, late in life, when he declared that Kathleen, his second wife, was a keeper of his collection as much as he was, and that after their deaths, ownership would go to their son Carl, a child unknown to the people whose sacred objects – and meanings – he would hold.

I find it extremely difficult to continue this discussion, because I'm trying to maintain several lines at once, and one of those lines of thought – the Aranda way of thinking about things – is almost beyond me, despite my interest and sympathies. I keep looking at something Barry Hill tells us about Pastor Liebler, who took over the Hermannsburg mission during the period when the Strehlows returned to Germany. Liebler was more inclined than Carl Strehlow to acquire and distribute native artefacts.

... between 1910 and 1913 Oscar Liebler gathered more than 2,000 artefacts and sold them to British and German museums, as well as to Adelaide. Liebler's awkward English account is also redolent with a sense of things 'secreted': 'As

never the blacks show ceremonial *tjurunga* marks', he once observed, 'to white strangers nor their wives, they only in dark nights secretly bring those specimen articles to us to sell it for money or large amounts of rations.' Liebler managed to observe, however, something that others had not: that the *tjurunga* did not so much belong to the Aranda men as the men belonged to the *tjurunga*.

I referred earlier to the difficulties of translating between dissimilar societies; the dissimilarity of Aranda and German/English/Australian Christians is here manifest; the key ideas in the above quotation, I think, are 'ceremonial' and 'belonging' (which I call possession, elsewhere in this essay). We are today inclined, I think, to say that ceremonial is at least mildly ridiculous, a form of play, or 'dressing up', and therefore innately childish. At other times and places, however, it has been much truer to say that human eyes can't see the major concepts or structural definitions of a society, and that it is only by participation in ceremonies that one can know what a society's major meanings are. In such societies, this is rarely a matter of choice. If you're present at, you participate in, the ceremonies, then you not only accept but you are part of the meaning. Why? How can this be so inescapable? Because you were one of those who *made* the meaning by acting out the ceremony.

The life of the Aranda people was created, as stated earlier, inside an oral tradition. This meant that the Aranda relied on memory; it also meant that tradition had to be created, over and over, by ceremony. As tradition sickened, the urge for ceremony weakened, and the Aranda, and other peoples, found their *tjurunga* caves being robbed, or, worse still, they began to think that if

they could sell their sacred objects to the white people then they might, by acquiring money, or food, take on some of the force, the invincibility of the invaders. Nothing could better show how reduced they'd become as a result of contact with the whites.

Should Strehlow not, then, have accepted their offers? Sitting at my desk in 2008, my answer's clear. He should have told his Aranda friends to keep their *tjurunga*. He should have said that they would eventually recover from the shock of a new culture swarming all over them and everything they held dear. He should have told them to hang on for dear life until they'd worked out ways to counter the influx, to get themselves ready for a new age of relativism when their system of ideas could not stand alone when there was another system visible to their young. Et cetera ...

But he didn't say these things, although the sight of Aranda men clutching their precious objects to their stomachs, mourning for what they were losing, was very moving for him. I think he felt that the triumph of the whites, desperately sad as it was for him, brought up as 'one of us', was inevitable, so that, insofar as he was his father's son, a missionary, God's ways were outlasting the pagan, and, insofar as he was an anthropologist, a Spencer, an Elkin, a Berndt, the white man's ways were so powerful that the obliteration of the black was inevitable. Hadn't Spencer himself said the same thing, years before?

He collected, he accepted. He guarded, making suitable promises because he understood better than most what these things meant to the men who were giving them up. He was, though he didn't know it, lowering himself toward the traps that closed on

him in later years. I'm thinking of Strehlow's offer of almost three hundred photos, colour and black & white, to the German *Stern* magazine, which paid him \$6 000 and 'published a sumptuous sixteen-page spread on secret-sacred Aranda ceremonies'. Reaction in Strehlow's country, the Aranda country, was intense. Here was the last custodian of sacred things selling their images to a foreign magazine! Strehlow had a lot to say, mostly to his diary, but the outcome was clear; he'd been digging in for years, presenting himself as the only one to be trusted with what nobody else could understand as he did, and time had rushed past him. The aboriginal people of Central Australia, and elsewhere, were struggling back onto their feet. They knew as well as Strehlow how much had been lost, but their pride in being black was beginning to grow. They needed Strehlow to help them rebuild their knowledge, or create a new knowledge perhaps, but if he could sell things that weren't his (they said) to people who had no right to see them, let alone spread them around to the uninformed and the never-to-be-initiated, then he'd broken the faith he'd once had with their ancestor-people.

The long association of the ancient Aranda people, the Lutheran pastors and the secular Australian anthropologists had broken, leaving Strehlow with nothing but his second wife, their child, Carl junior, and what remained of his friendships with university colleagues. His life was all but done, and he collapsed when speaking at the opening of an exhibition of maps, artefacts etc of the Strehlow Research Foundation in Adelaide, in October 1978. Strehlow had reached his three score and ten, and the last word he

uttered was *ingkaia*, the name of the rabbit-eared bandicoot, known today as the bilby.

Was that a trivial, ridiculous last thing to say, or did it reach into the past of the people whose secret knowledge he'd cherished for so long? Barry Hill doesn't talk about Strehlow's funeral, who was there and what they said about him. He lets the story end with *ingkaia*, the bilby. But the story doesn't end there, as we find somewhat earlier in the book, when Strehlow returns to Hermannsburg in 1977 to celebrate the centenary of the mission. He's confronted at one stage by an Aranda man called Armstrong, who refuses to shake Strehlow's hand, argues with him, and spits on the ground by way of taking his leave of the famous pastor's son. As Barry Hill sees it, Armstrong's displeasure concerned the *tjurunga* and other material which Strehlow was treating as if it was his to display or keep out of sight, and his to pass on to a woman that the senior aboriginal men didn't know. That was an unpleasant encounter, no doubt, but an even bigger surprise came to Strehlow on a drive to Gilbert Springs, west of the mission. Strehlow had been talking to the driver, Gary Stott, and superintendent of the mission, about the *tjilpa*, the native cat or western quoll, a creature almost extinct, that was the centre of one of the region's most powerful dreaming stories. As the white men talked, Malbunka, a black man sitting in the back whom Strehlow believed had left his traditional culture behind, as so many others had done, began to sing, softly.

Strehlow tuned in.

Malbunka was singing the native cat song.

Strehlow could not believe his ears, but it was true: Malbunka knew some *tjilpa* verses. He sang some on the way to Gilbert Springs, and some on the way back.

When Strehlow expressed his astonishment to Stott, he was told, 'They need things to go on with. Their parents continued to teach them some things, otherwise they'd be living really ignorant.'

Of course we have to ask, ignorant of what? Every single one of us is ignorant in areas of human understanding. Nobody knows everything, so we must value what we know and try to diminish our ignorance a little, when the opportunity arises. It's only thirty one years since Malbunka sang his verses, thirty seven since *Songs of Central Australia* was published (after fifteen years of delay, shortage of money for the project, and so on), and what has happened in those years? First, I'm sure that the verses, the songs that Malbunka and no doubt others knew haven't died out; I'm sure they're still retained in memories here and there, Australia-wide. I'm equally sure that Strehlow's compilation hasn't yet had the influence it must one day have. As I write, in 2008, aboriginals are better known for their footballing ability than for their songs. The unity of aboriginal cultures hasn't yet been identified as something for the wider, non-aboriginal areas of society to emulate. European culture, American capitalist culture, still thrive on separations, dissent, the fruitful (if often wasteful) dualisms we take to be natural in our thought, good and evil being the dichotomy of greatest force. We are still waiting for the black cultures of our country to join the white. Instead of rejecting them, as earlier settlers did so

often, we're now inviting them to join us but that means nothing unless it means that we're wanting to be invited to join them too. Anthropology is a fascinating 'science', but it's a discipline (if it is) created by the European mind, not the native. We are still so evolutionary in our thought that we are willing to classify cultures as superior or otherwise ('stone age' is a good example of a name that carries condemnation). It's always our assumption that we are the cutting edge civilisation, while they, the culture identified for observation, can be known by us in a one-way examination. This is vile diplomacy and desperately damaging for the culture being studied. Things could be turned around, by questions such as, how did you learn about us? What did you reject and what did you like? What would you like us to absorb from you? How can we create new pathways, modern trading paths, or 'songlines', to use a somewhat suspect word, for you to find ways into our society and for us to find ways into yours? Questions like these come flooding to my mind, and no doubt yours too, dear reader. We need to think about them, grateful for insights because 'answers' can't be expected at this still-early stage in the interaction of civilisations, with the older one grievously damaged by what the newer one has done, consciously and deliberately, but also in ignorance. Above all, the lesson to be drawn, in my view, from the lives of the Strehlows and the anthropologists, professional and amateur (Spencer & Gillen) who were the Strehlows' contemporaries, is that anthropology and religion – yes, even religion – must become two-sided conversations with the 'native' or 'primitive' side being taken as having as much to contribute as our side. Reading Barry Hill's book makes me

glad that that first period of contact, with all its destruction, and its sharply learned lessons too, is over. The second period will have to be different, won't it, if the native people are ever to feel that the invasion was, after all, and with its many ghastly deeds and consequences, actually worthwhile, in the end.

There's never an end, but there are always new beginnings, and *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, in examining the thinking of one period so thoroughly makes it possible for another period to begin. We could start with those Songs, I think: don't you? I'd like to hear a few at the start and end of each day ...