

Introduction

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The contents of this volume are testimony to the highly globalised anthropological scene of the turn-of-the-century era. With his friendships in Aboriginal communities, his rural correspondents and his international network of publishing contacts, R. H. Mathews channelled the flow of information from the Australian backblocks to the major imperial centres. The postal system was as fundamental to him as the internet is to a researcher today. That he would have envied the instantaneity we take for granted is suggested when he grumbles to E. S. Hartland that his letters to Britain take a month to arrive. The system was fairly slow, but measures were put in place to allow scientific knowledge to flow as efficiently as possible. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington ran an International Exchange Service, specifically designed to distribute research publications between governments and societies throughout the world. Mathews' correspondence with his editor at the American Philosophical Society reveals that he made generous use of this scheme.¹

Many books could be made from correspondence in the R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia. But as I noted in the general introduction to this volume, his failure to keep copies of the many letters he wrote means that his own voice is largely missing. Also absent from the National Library collection are most of the letters he received from overseas anthropologists. His diary indicates that he wrote to many luminaries in the social sciences. His British correspondents included Ernest Crawley, Alfred C. Haddon, Andrew Lang, W. H. R. Rivers, Northcote W. Thomas and Sir E. B. Tylor—all major figures at the time.² It is rather a mystery that letters from none of these men survive in Mathews' papers. Given the care he took in ordering and preserving other paperwork, it is hard to believe that he disposed of letters from leaders in his field of study. It seems more likely that these documents were set aside for 'safekeeping', perhaps by Mathews' son William, who took great interest in his father's legacy. Their present whereabouts is unknown. It is unlikely that they were among the great bulk of Mathews' papers that A. P. Elkin borrowed from the family in the 1950s. Had he seen letters from the likes of Lang and Tylor, he would surely have said so in his trilogy of articles, 'R. H. Mathews: His Contribution to Aboriginal Studies' (1975-6).³ Nor is it likely that Elkin ever read the letters Mathews received from Baron Moritz von Leonhardi, reproduced here. Von Leonhardi was the editor and confidante of the Lutheran missionary, Pastor Carl Strehlow, who also corresponded with Mathews. Janet Mathews (granddaughter-in-law of R. H.) gave the letters to the linguist Luise Hercus who

in turn gave them to Carl's son, the linguist T. G. H. Strehlow. They can now be found in the collection of the Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs.

It would be fascinating to reconstruct the dialogue between Mathews and von Leonhardi (1856-1910). But the baron's villa in Frankfurt, where his manuscripts and ethnographic collections were held, was destroyed during World War II.⁴ The one extant letter from Mathews to von Leonhardi is published here, copied from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. Its existence in Australia is explained by its date—1911. Mathews was unaware that von Leonhardi had died the previous year until his letter was returned to sender. Some of Mathews' correspondence does survive in British and American institutions. Via Britain's National Registry of Archives, an on-line search tool, I was led to the papers of the folklorist E. S. Hartland, another correspondent mentioned in Mathews' diary. The eight letters Mathews wrote to him over an 18-month period in 1907-08 are part of a large collection of Hartland manuscripts, held by the National Library of Wales.

Edwin Sidney Hartland (1848-1927) was a solicitor from Gloucester in the south of England. His abiding interest in folk narratives led him to the Folk-Lore Society, of which he became president. His contributions to the society's journal *Folk-Lore* began in the 1880s and in 1890 he published *English Fairy and Other Folk Tales*. This was followed by *The Science of Fairy Tales, An Enquiry into the Fairy Mythology* (1891), which the historian of folklore study Richard M. Dorson regards as a 'masterly treatise'.⁵ Dorson describes how Hartland's work gradually shifted 'from folk narrative to primitive institutions'—a transition echoed more broadly in British intellectual life. The consequence of this was a period of sustained dialogue between folklorists and anthropologists. Hartland, for example, believed that folklore study could be sharpened by the scientific methods of ethnology. Interpreting data collected by colonial observers, he led a vigorous debate about whether 'primitives' were cognisant of the connection between sexual intercourse and conception. In this he made a major impact on early twentieth-century anthropology.⁶

Hartland communicated with Mathews and other Australians including Catherine Eliza Somerville Stow (who published as K. Langloh Parker) and A. W. Howitt. (Their letters can also be found in the National Library of Wales.) He reviewed Mathews' *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria* (1905) in 1906.⁷ This was probably the impetus for their correspondence, for the first evidence of communication with Hartland appears in Mathews' diary of July that year.⁸ Although their correspondence seems to have lasted only 18 months, a confidence quickly developed. These eight letters give valuable insights into how Mathews presented himself as an anthropological correspondent, a role to which he was well accustomed, but of which so little evidence survives.

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The correspondence from von Leonhardi, translated from the German, provides another perspective on Mathews' international project. It is pertinent to this collection for several reasons. Firstly, it reveals that Mathews' language skills were sufficient for him to read von Leonhardi's quite technical German, although insufficient for him to *write* in that language. Mathews' sole surviving letter to von Leonhardi is in English, and is presumably representative of the others. Secondly, the correspondence gives an indication of the highly detailed scrutiny that Australian ethnologists received at the hands of some Europeans. Von Leonhardi may not have written in English but he could certainly read it. The correspondence reveals that Mathews supplied the baron with many of his writings, but others he came across independently in his panoramic reading of contemporary anthropology. Von Leonhardi makes a revealing remark when he complains to Mathews that his bookseller can no longer obtain the journal *Science of Man*. Published by the Anthropological Society of Australasia, it was hardly common in Australia. That von Leonhardi could buy it at all is an indication of the ethnological fever then prevalent in Europe. So it is not surprising that von Leonhardi was reported as possessing a 'close to complete anthropological library, including books not readily available in Germany'.⁹

Von Leonhardi was a wealthy aristocrat who resided mainly at his family's country seat in Gross-Karben near Frankfurt, from where these letters were written. A biographical portrait of him, written by the present-day anthropologist Anna Kenny, gives valuable insight to his thinking and background. He received a classic humanist German schooling and for a time studied law at Heidelberg. After a serious bout of illness he abandoned law and turned his attention to natural science and philosophy. In the last decade of his life, anthropology became his abiding interest and he maintained extensive correspondence with many well-known anthropologists in Europe and the British Isles. Kenny emphasises that during this period the anthropological environment of Germany was very different to the British scene, dominated as it was by evolutionary thinking. She points out that Germany did not become an imperial power until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, so unlike Britain it had little invested in 'an ideology of racial superiority'.¹⁰ This is enormously significant to understanding the readership Mathews found in Germany and Austria, and the skepticism about the theories of Spencer and Gillen that he shared with both von Leonhardi and Strehlow. As Kenny puts it, '[u]nlike the British anthropological tradition which dominated Australian discourse, German anthropology was based on a humanistic agenda, and as a result it was anti-evolutionistic, as well as anti-racist and anti-colonialist'.¹¹

Von Leonhardi had a profound effect upon Pastor Carl Strehlow, missionary at the remote settlement of Hermannsburg in Central Australia. He encouraged

him to document language and mythology and arranged for publication of his seven-volume magnum opus, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* (1907–20), a work highly esteemed in Germany, although much ignored by the Anglophone world. Even now, it has not been fully translated into English. T. G. H. Strehlow's biographer Barry Hill relates how von Leonhardi urged Strehlow 'to keep on sending his material in the hope that "the spell of the book by Spencer and Gillen will hopefully be broken and destroyed by science"'.¹² Given Mathews' conviction, as he writes to Hartland, that Spencer had done 'all he could to injure me,' it is not surprising that a sympathy grew between them. It is an indication of von Leonhardi's independence of mind that despite his concerns about Spencer and Gillen's work on Central Australia, he upheld their view that the kinship system of the Arrernte people descends patrilineally. Years later, Mathews' arguments for matrilineal descent, advanced so passionately in his letters to Hartland, were robustly dismissed by the younger Strehlow who regarded them as 'utterly worthless misrepresentations of doctored facts'.¹³ It is a view now widely accepted.

The Hartland and von Leonhardi letters give two perspectives on Mathews' intransigence about the marriage customs of a part of Australia he had never visited in person. Undoubtedly, his views on this matter were coloured by the shabby treatment he had received from Spencer and his friend Howitt. And almost as strong was Mathews' craving for acceptance in Britain. He urged Hartland to tell him 'what decision the English ethnologists come to regarding my views of the descent of the children in the Central Australian Tribes'. Yet it is doubtful that his opinion could ever have found acceptance in the nation where Spencer and Gillen were high gods of anthropology. The fact that a German ethnologist was prepared to analyse his findings in excruciating detail—a critic informed by Strehlow who had daily contact with Aboriginal people in that very area—did nothing to convince him of his error. His views on patrilineal descent of the Arrernte remained fixed, as can be seen in an article dated 1912 in which Radcliffe-Brown was drawn into the debate.¹⁴ Mathews often preached about the necessity of 'getting among the natives' in person. His stubbornness on this matter is evidence of the soundness of his own advice.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mathews to J. Minnis Hayes, 27 September 1897, Records of the American Philosophical Society.

² Diary 1893–1907, R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 8006/1/2.

³ Elkin, A. P. 1975, 'R. H. Mathews: His Contribution to Aboriginal Studies: Part I', *Oceania*, vol. 46, no. 1; Elkin, A. P. 1975, 'R. H. Mathews: His Contribution to Aboriginal Studies: Part II', *Oceania*, vol. 46, no. 2; and Elkin, A. P. 1976, 'R. H. Mathews: His Contribution to Aboriginal Studies: Part III', *Oceania*, vol. 46, no. 3.

⁴ Hill, Barry 2002, *Broken Song: T. G. H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, Knopf, Milsons Point, NSW, p. 483.

⁵ Dorson, Richard M. 1968, *The British Folklorists: A History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 239.

- ⁶ See Hiatt, L. R. 1996, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 109 & 122.
- ⁷ Hartland, E. Sidney 1906, 'Review of *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria*', *MAN*, vol. 9, no. 99.
- ⁸ Diary 1893-1907, entry for 17-24 July 1906.
- ⁹ Kenny, Anna 2005, 'A Sketch Portrait: Carl Strehlow's editor Baron Moritz von Leonhardi' in Kenny, Anna and Mitchell, Scott (eds), *Strehlow Research Centre Occasional Paper 4: Collaboration and Language*, SRC, Alice Springs, p. 56.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Hill, *Broken Song*, pp. 33-4.
- ¹³ Strehlow, T. G. H. 1999, 'Aranda Regular and Irregular Marriages', *Strehlow Research Centre Occasional Paper 2*, SRC, Alice Springs, p. 41.
- ¹⁴ RHM 1912, 'Matrilineal Descent in the Arranda and Chingalee Tribes', *MAN*, vol. 12, no. 47.