

## Preface

Almost 90 years on from his death, this is the first book-length collection of the writings of Robert Hamilton Mathews. It has been a long wait for the Australian-born surveyor who began his career as an anthropologist at the age of 52 with the 1893 publication of a brief paper on New South Wales rock art.<sup>1</sup> Apart from a few short booklets, Mathews' book of 1905, *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria*, was his only work of anthropology to be published as a freestanding volume.<sup>2</sup> A reprint of a long article published the previous year,<sup>3</sup> it was a modest tome in that age of doorstopper monographs—'little more than a pamphlet' according to Mathews' friend, the British folklorist E. S. Hartland.<sup>4</sup> There was certainly an expectation that a writer so prolific as Mathews would disseminate his work in a substantial book. As Arnold van Gennep, the Parisian anthropologist, pointed out to him, 'your publications are for the most part overlooked ... because they are scattered amongst a mass of periodicals and it is a very difficult matter to have them all at one time in hand'. Van Gennep recommended that Mathews immediately arrange for their 'publication in 2 or 3 volumes'<sup>5</sup>—advice endorsed by Hartland who was enlisted to work with Mathews' ornithologist son Gregory, then living in England, to place a manuscript with a London publisher (see 'Correspondence', this volume). But these efforts were unsuccessful and R. H. Mathews died in 1918 without ever publishing his magnum opus.

His formidable success as an author of journal articles, and his failure as an author of books, is one of the many paradoxes surrounding this quixotic and extremely private man. The publications reproduced in this volume are evidence that he enjoyed quite a measure of international success. In total, his 171 works of anthropology run to more than 2,200 published pages. Even this output, substantial as it is, does not convey the full scale of Mathews' ethnographic labour. As scholars of his work have come to realise, further invaluable material survives in the collection of R. H. Mathews Papers, held by the National Library of Australia.

This book was unwittingly conceived in 2002 when I was studying the Mathews Papers during a Harold White Fellowship at the National Library in Canberra. That Mathews published in French and German, as well as English, was fairly well known. But the extent of his linguistic ability remained unclear. I began to investigate, and quickly established that translators played a role in preparing for publication *all* of Mathews' foreign-language articles. From that point, other questions emerged. Were they original writings or did they replicate material published elsewhere in English? Initially, I suspected the latter, partly because I knew that in the early days of his anthropological research, Mathews was criticised for duplicating his findings in different journals.<sup>6</sup> The texts reveal,

however, that Mathews had learnt his lesson from the duplication controversy. The majority of his 18 works in French and German are unique. As such, they have been largely inaccessible to the Anglophone world, especially to the Aboriginal communities whose culture and heritage they discuss.

A desire to make the foreign language material readily available was the initial motivation for this book. In so doing, it gives, for the first time in a single volume, a survey of Mathews' ethnographic publications. Not accidentally, he ensured that his readers in continental Europe were exposed to almost the full range of his inquiries. There are works of linguistic documentation; descriptions of art and material culture; studies of kinship and marriage rules; and more general discussion of his theories about the Aboriginal settlement of Australia. The longest paper and the first in this volume, 'Contributions to the Ethnography of the Australians' (1907), contains detailed description of leisure activities, cookery, tool-making, body ornamentation and many other aspects of daily life. To ensure that all Mathews' major interests are represented in this book, I have also included examples of how he documented Aboriginal myth. My introductory essay provides the context for Mathews' bitter relations with his contemporaries in Australia. It also gives biographical background to his anthropological practice, and makes some suggestions about how his cross-cultural project informs the history of colonisation and modernity.

I have long believed that the sum of Mathews' anthropological inquiry is greater than its individual parts. His network of international associates (formed through correspondence rather than personal association) saw him published in both specialist anthropological journals and more general scientific periodicals. This strategy evolved because Mathews, who in his most prolific period pumped out more than a dozen articles a year, wrote more than he could ever hope to place in the handful of Australian learned journals. Soon he was savouring the prestige of overseas recognition. Perennially on the hunt for new venues, he developed an internationally dispersed mode of publishing that gained him exposure, but which had the unfortunate effect of diluting his impact since it created for the reader the very problem identified by van Gennep. As the latter realised, the meaning of a short article on kinship or a description of a particular ceremony is transformed by the knowledge that each is just a fragment of a broad inquiry that spans hundreds of pages. The large number of often short papers tends to exaggerate the antiquarian quality of Mathews' reportage. Writing under headings such as 'folklore', 'ceremony' or 'rock art', he appears to compartmentalise aspects of culture that are necessarily connected. These limitations are partially circumvented when Mathews' reports are read in the context of each other. The impact is cumulative and the work acquires a critical mass.

Inevitably, my editorial bias has shaped this collection. On one hand, I hope that a selection of his writings will allow Mathews to be better understood as a writer and researcher; on the other, I have tried to explain why a scholar so serious and prolific in the documentation of Aboriginal culture is not better known. As I argue in the introduction, Mathews' reputation was severely diminished by the campaign of his Melbourne-based adversary W. Baldwin Spencer, aided and abetted by Spencer's close friend, A. W. Howitt. Spencer's opinion of Mathews was, by his own admission, 'too libellous' to publish, but this did not prevent him from sharing it liberally in private communications, particularly with anthropologists in Britain. Howitt chose to ignore Mathews, despite the fact that he was amassing a substantial portfolio of work on southeast Australia—his own area of specialisation. Howitt went for a decade without ever quoting Mathews or otherwise acknowledging his existence. Only in 1907, when Mathews accused Howitt of both plagiarising and ignoring him in the letters pages of *Nature*, did the two rivals debate each other. Further insights into these murky interpersonal politics, and their personal effect upon Mathews, can be derived from his correspondence with E. S. Hartland and Moritz von Leonhardi's letters to him, reproduced in the final section of the book. In this way I have tried to represent various faces of Mathews. We meet him as an ethnological reporter and a correspondent.

Many collections could be made from so prolific a scholar. While I hope that more will follow, I suspect that none could claim to be truly representative. His opus is simply too vast. As the title suggests, *translation* emerged as the overarching theme of this book. It developed during dialogue with Mathilde de Hauteclouque and Christine Winter, who displayed such generosity and humour as they re-translated Mathews from the French and German. Presented with the reality that a retranslation could never entirely restore the 'original' text, we began to think about the degree to which *all* anthropological labour involves translation. The message is both cautionary and illuminating. Mathews is now read for his localised accounts of Aboriginal knowledge. Yet his arrangement and interpretation of that knowledge—and even the fact that he recorded it at all—was contingent on him having an international audience, most of whom had little sense of the people with whom he worked.

Finally, an explanation of the terminology I use for non-Aboriginal people in my introductory text. When referring to 'white people' and 'whitefellows' I am not suggesting that the non-Indigenous population of Australia is, or ever has been, racially homogenous. Rather, I take guidance from the contemporary anthropologist Ghassan Hage who argues that deliberate and critical use of the term 'white' is a way of acknowledging that people who are part of this large, powerful and diverse social group have their own collective values and mores; their own language and forms of kinship. That is to say, *they are an ethnic group*.<sup>7</sup> In R. H. Mathews' period, settler-society saw itself as predominantly white and

made considerable efforts to maintain the racial uniformity of its members. Inevitably, Mathews' ethnographic inquiries were informed by this social and political situation. When I use the descriptor 'white', I acknowledge this history without wishing to endorse it.

M. T.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Mathews (henceforth RHM) 1893, 'Rock Paintings by the Aborigines in Caves on Bulgar Creek, near Singleton', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 27.

<sup>2</sup> RHM 1905, *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria*, F. W. White General Printer, Sydney.

<sup>3</sup> RHM 1904, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Hartland, E. Sidney 1906, 'Review of *Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria*', *MAN*, vol. 9, no. 99, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Van Gennep to Mathews, 1 July 1907, R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 8006/2/13.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Martin 2004, 'R. H. Mathews and anthropological warfare: On writing the biography of a "self-contained man"', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Hage, Ghassan 1998, *White Nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Pluto Press and Comerford & Miller, Annandale, NSW. A fuller response to Hage is contained in Thomas, Martin 2001, *A Multicultural Landscape: National Parks and the Macedonian Experience*, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service and Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW.