

# ERHARD EYLMANN: A GERMAN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN AUSTRALIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Erhard Eylmann (1860–1926) was a German scientist who devoted much of his working life to researching Australia, where he travelled extensively during the period 1896 to 1913. His primary field of expertise was anthropology, about which he wrote at great length in his major work *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien* (The Aborigines of the Colony of South Australia). This paper places Eylmann and his work in a tradition of German scientific endeavour which can be traced back to William Blandowski and Alexander von Humboldt. Eylmann's insistence on the primacy of empirical methodology and his belief in the essential unity of all the scientific disciplines characterise his work. At the same time the paper argues that Eylmann's approach to anthropological study was also indebted to practitioners outside Germany, in particular Francis Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. Similarly, there were other anthropologists in Eylmann's own time – foremost among them Carl Strehlow – who adopted a very different paradigm in their efforts to understand indigenous Australians.

**Keywords:** Erhard Eylmann, German anthropology, Carl Strehlow, Australian Aborigines

An illustration in William Blandowski's great work *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen nach zehnjährigen Erfahrungen* (Australia in 142 Photographic Illustrations after Ten Years' Experience) (Blandowski 1862) offers great insights, not only into what Blandowski hoped to achieve during his Australian decade, but also into the state of European scientific endeavour in the second half of the nineteenth century. A series of interlocking circles bears the names of the scientific disciplines and the objects of investigation to which Blandowski devoted a good part of his life (Allen 2010: 20). The disciplines were Geography, Geology and Paleontology, while the objects were vegetation, animals and, last but by no means least, Aborigines. This single image expresses perhaps as well as any other the Humboldtian ideals that animated Blandowski and countless other German scientists of his age. Scientific endeavour, like the elements of the natural world which were to be observed, ordered and explained, could be broken down into their component parts. At the same time, those parts were always connected to each other and to a much greater whole, which ultimately needed to be understood not as an aggregation but in its entirety.

This paper deals with a German scientist who shares with Blandowski an indebtedness to that Humboldtian scientific paradigm, but who has drifted into obscurity. Erhard Eylmann, like Blandowski, devoted much of his life to Australia, both as a traveller and as a scientist. Yet unlike Blandowski, whose legacy has had some recognition in recent times, the fruits of Eylmann's scientific work in Australia have largely been ignored, both in his German homeland and in Australia, where his great book *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien* (The Aborigines of the Colony of South Australia) remains untranslated to this day (Eylmann 1908).

Nonetheless Eylmann's legacy is important and deserving of attention, especially in Australia, which remained the consistent focus of his keen scientific mind from the early 1890s through to his death in 1926. Firstly, even at a time of increasing scientific specialisation of science, decades after both Alexander von Humboldt and William Blandowski, Eylmann remained committed to a form of science which was holistic in its foundations and in its practice. His disciplinary range stretches from sociology to ornithology, from geology and anthropology (Schröder 2002). Secondly, although Eylmann pursued his scientific work without institutional support or an academic base, his case illustrates the ways in which science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built on international networks which transcended national boundaries.

The primary focus here is Eylmann's anthropological work in Australia, which complemented his other work but also overshadowed it both in terms of the investment of his time and in the published output. The intention is to place Eylmann in a tradition of anthropological inquiry which had roots in Germany but not in Germany alone. His approach was informed by his background in the natural and medical sciences, not uncommon in Germany, yet shared by anthropologists elsewhere, among them the University of Melbourne's Baldwin Spencer (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985). It was an approach that in its very foundations stood at odds with the work of others, including those who came to the discipline of anthropology via a humanist tradition that emphasised the importance of intersubjective understanding. Among the proponents of this approach, too, were many Germans, most notably missionaries such as Carl Strehlow, who came to know Erhard Eylmann but would never appreciate either the man or his work.



Figure 1: Title and content of William Blandowski's experiences of 10 years in Australia, from Harry Allen (ed.), 2010. *Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 20.

### BIOGRAPHY

The origins of Eylmann's mature scientific work may be found in his early life and his education. Biographical information on Eylmann is sparse (Bunzendahl 1938; Schröder 2002; Courto 1990, 2004; Hintze 1996; Monteath 2013). Born in 1860 into a landowning family on the Elbe island of Krautsand, not far from Hamburg, Eylmann attended a series of German universities, beginning with Leipzig, where he studied biology, zoology, physics, chemistry and anatomy. In the following year, 1884, he moved to Freiburg, where he continued his studies of the natural sciences, graduating with a doctorate. At the same time he commenced medical studies, which he went on to pursue in both Heidelberg and Würzburg, so that by 1889 he could add the title Doctor of Medicine to his name (Bunzendahl 1938: 38–39).

That he practised medicine for three years in Cairo seems to be due to the putative benefits to his sickly wife of the dry Egyptian climate. After her death in 1894, Eylmann returned to Germany, having resolved never to practise medicine again (Bunzendahl 1938: 39–40). Instead he moved to Berlin to resume his studies, now devoted to geography, geology and anthropology. All those subjects could be pursued at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-

Universität, but anthropology in particular was nurtured also by the Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (*Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*) (Zimmerman 2001). The extent of Eylmann's involvement with the society is uncertain, (Bunzendahl 1938: 40), but he may well have found its president Rudolf Virchow a sympathetic figure, since Virchow, too, had come to anthropology via medicine. The society formed an important institutional base for German anthropology, especially as the discipline's presence within the university, where it attracted the suspicions of historians rooted in a humanist tradition, was at first tenuous (Zimmerman 2001).

Eylmann's dedication to anthropology might well have led him to read one of the discipline's seminal works at that time, namely *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen* (Guide to Scientific Observations on Travels) (Neumayer 1888). Its editor was Georg Balthasar von Neumayer, who in the years 1857 to 1864 had himself undertaken a range of scientific projects in Australia. *Anleitung*, which served as both a theoretical and practical guide to participants in scientific expeditions, was first published in 1875 (Neumayer 1875). The expanded, second edition of 1888 contains two essays

that would have been of great interest to anthropologists preparing themselves for fieldwork (Murray 2004). One was by Adolf Bastian – the first director of Berlin’s anthropological museum the *Museum für Völkerkunde* – and discussed general anthropological concepts; the other, by Virchow, was devoted to anthropology and prehistory (Bastian 1888; Virchow 1888). A common message across the great variety of disciplines united in Neumayer’s compendium opened the chapter on linguistics:

The traveller must never forget the first rule, that the sole task of his journey is to collect material which can later be scientifically assessed at leisure by himself or by others. His job is to observe and record facts. (Steinthal 1888: 258)

While an interest in anthropology was widespread among scientifically trained Germans like Eylmann, in another regard – his mode of travel – Eylmann was not at all typical. In the last part of the nineteenth century, German scientific expeditions to various parts of the globe had become commonplace. In the period 1873 to 1900, no fewer than 150 different expeditions were sent from Germany to Africa alone (Penny 2002: 27–28). Eylmann’s preference, however, was to travel alone, which he could afford to do provided he lived frugally. He followed the practice of collecting extensively on his travels, but he collected for the sake of his own research rather than to expand the collections of Germany’s museums. Temperamentally, it appears, Eylmann was ill-suited to collaborative ventures and moreover was sufficiently confident in his mastery of a range of the natural sciences – not just anthropology – to consider himself equipped to write about Australia across many branches of scientific knowledge (Hintze 1996).

#### EYLMANN’S AUSTRALIAN FIELDWORK

Eylmann visited Australia not just once but three times. His primary interest was the colony (from 1901 the state) of South Australia, which until 1911 included the Northern Territory. He first arrived in Adelaide in February 1896, then travelled north by train and on horseback to Palmerston (now Darwin), which he reached at the end of August 1897 (Eylmann 1908: 5–15). After spending most of the wet season a short distance east of Palmerston, he headed south once more from February 1898, reaching Adelaide at the beginning of the following year. After a brief rest he then headed east on foot, following the coast into Victoria before returning to Adelaide via an inland route and then sailing for Germany (Eylmann 1908: 15–22). As early as the following year, 1900, Eylmann was back in Australia, travelling in both South Australia and Victoria (Eylmann 1908: 23). He undertook his third and

final tour of Australia in 1912–1913. Hopes of a fourth visit were quashed by the war and eventually by his death in 1926 (Schröder 2002: 216–32).

There is no clear indication as to why Eylmann chose Australia, and specifically South Australia, for his fieldwork. A number of factors, however, might have pushed him in that direction. In the late nineteenth century the discipline of anthropology displayed a deep interest in Australia. As the prominent American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan put it in 1880, Australian Aboriginal societies ‘now represent the condition of mankind in savagery better than it is elsewhere represented on the earth – a condition now rapidly passing away’ (Morgan 1880: 2). Among the fruits of this intense interest in indigenous Australians as examples of what German anthropologists called a *Naturvolk* (people of nature) was, as Nicolas Peterson has pointed out, a spate of influential works of anthropological theory in the first part of the twentieth century (Peterson 1990). The assumption was that a close study of Australian Aborigines, at least of those still largely outside the influence of European civilisation, could provide insights into the very origins of humankind. Eylmann was in good company in choosing to dedicate himself to what is commonly known as ‘salvage anthropology’, that is, the attempt to record and preserve the artefacts of a culture whose demise, it was widely assumed, was just a matter of time. It is possible also, as Schröder suggests, that Eylmann might have been influenced in his choice by Neumayer (Schröder 2002: 41).

As was the case for William Blandowski, and before him Ferdinand von Mueller, Eylmann’s first port of call in Australia was Adelaide. But where Blandowski and von Mueller were soon attracted to Melbourne, Eylmann’s focus remained on South Australia (Monteath 2013). On two of his expeditions following the coast south-east from Adelaide he crossed the border into Victoria, reaching as far as Cape Otway (Bunzendahl 1938: 55–56). However, with these minor exceptions his attention remained devoted to South Australia.

While Melbourne had been for some time a centre of German scientific endeavour in Australia, Adelaide had much to offer too, as Eylmann was soon to establish. In the account of his first journey to Australia, Eylmann reports that after his arrival he spent a month in Adelaide, ‘so that through study carried out in the public library, the zoological and botanical garden and the various museums I could familiarise myself with the fauna, the flora and the geological composition of central Australia, the destination of my travels’ (Eylmann 1908: 6). Among those from whom he could solicit advice were a number of his countrymen. By the 1890s, Germans were firmly integrated into the city’s scientific establishment. At the museum, for example, the

zoologist and assistant director was Amandus Zietz, who had brought with him to Adelaide experience gathered both at the Godeffroy Museum in Hamburg and the University of Kiel's Natural History Museum (Jones 2011: 225). Zietz was one of several German appointments made to the museum's staff by an earlier director, the German Johann Wilhelm Haacke, a zoology graduate from the University of Jena (Jones 2011: 224). Zietz's willingness to extend the hand of friendship to visiting German scientists is suggested by his hosting in the following year of a two-month visit by the Berlin craniologist Professor R. Krause (Jones 2011: 228). The director of Adelaide's Botanical Garden at this time was Maurice Holtze, a Hanoverian who had studied botany in his home town before appointments in St Petersburg and Palmerston (Kraehenbuehl 1983).

After spending a month in Adelaide in early 1896, Eylmann commenced his journey north in March. It was a self-funded expedition to Australia, in which he was the sole participant, even if at times he travelled in the company of others (Bunzendahl 1938: 40). The initial stage of his journey was by train to Oodnadatta, where he purchased two horses, enabling him to travel further north on horseback. As he put it, 'I travelled like a regular bushman. I used one horse for riding, and the other horse carried my precious possessions' (Eylmann 1908: 7). Generally he followed the main track along the Overland Telegraph Line, but Eylmann was in no hurry; to satisfy his curiosity, and to explore relatively unknown territory, he made numerous excursions to the east and the west of the line. His primary interest was to observe and glean information about indigenous Australians, but he also evinced a lively interest in biology, zoology and geology. His accommodation was either under the open sky or, on numerous occasions and for lengthy periods, with hosts who welcomed him into their home. Thus he spent some months at Stirling Station, some twenty kilometres south of Barrow Creek; he also stayed for a protracted period as a guest of German missionaries at the Lutheran Mission Station at Hermannsburg. Not until the middle of 1897 did he reach the railhead at Pine Creek in the Northern Territory, where he remained for several weeks. He then made another of his detours from the main track to visit another mission station, this time run by Irish and Austrian Jesuits on the Daly River. At the end of August he finally reached Palmerston, today's Darwin (Bunzendahl 1938: 43–51).

Others might at this point have chosen to return to Adelaide by sea, but Eylmann decided to retrace his steps across the continent. He sat out the bulk of the rainy season on the outskirts of Palmerston. His return journey saw him spend extended periods at Rum Jungle and once again at Hermannsburg, which he reached in the first week of

July. Not until the middle of October 1898 did he leave his fellow Germans, visiting the Arltunga goldfields in the MacDonnell Ranges before rejoining the Overland Telegraph Line at Alice Springs and following it south, still on horseback, to Oodnadatta, where he sold his horses and purchased a train ticket to complete his journey. He arrived back in Adelaide in late December (Bunzendahl 1938: 51–55).

On this occasion Adelaide did not hold his attention long. After a month he resolved to undertake a further expedition, this time on foot, and in a south-easterly direction to the colony of Victoria. Over a period of five weeks he walked some 800 kilometres, following the Coorong, reaching Cape Otway and then returning to Adelaide on an inland route which took him through Border Town. After two weeks in Adelaide he boarded a steamer for his homeland (Bunzendahl 1938, 55–56).

With that his Australian travels were not over. A year later, in June of 1900, he was back in South Australia. He undertook two relatively brief expeditions, both of them to mission stations. The first, of just eight days, was to the Congregationalist mission station at Point Macleay (now Raukkan), on Lake Alexandrina. There followed a longer expedition of several weeks to the Lutheran mission station known as Bethesda at Killalpaninna on Cooper's Creek. To reach it he once more caught a train, disembarking at Hergott Springs and then making a 150-kilometre trek east. He was back in Adelaide by August and then returned again to Germany (Bunzendahl 1938: 57).

A third and final visit, made after the publication of his magnum opus, occurred in 1912–1913. His travels were confined to the continent's south-east, comprising a distance of some 1200–1200 kilometres covered on foot and by train, as well as a distance of some 1500 kilometres by steamer on the Murray. His scholarly interests appear to have moved beyond ethnography; in any case his later publications are devoted to ornithology and sociology (Eylmann 1911, 1914, 1922).

All of these expeditions in Australia were self-funded by Eylmann, who not only travelled alone much of the time but wrote up the results of his work alone. He was, it must be remembered, not a professional anthropologist and continued to eschew formal institutional affiliations. Nonetheless his anthropological work was not performed in a vacuum but relied heavily on contacts and connections in a network of scientific endeavour. After his initial discussions with German scientists in Adelaide, two connections were important to him, though for quite different reasons. The first was the connection with the Lutheran missionaries who hosted him at the Hermannsburg mission on his journey north to Darwin and then again on his return south. The key figure here was Carl Strehlow,

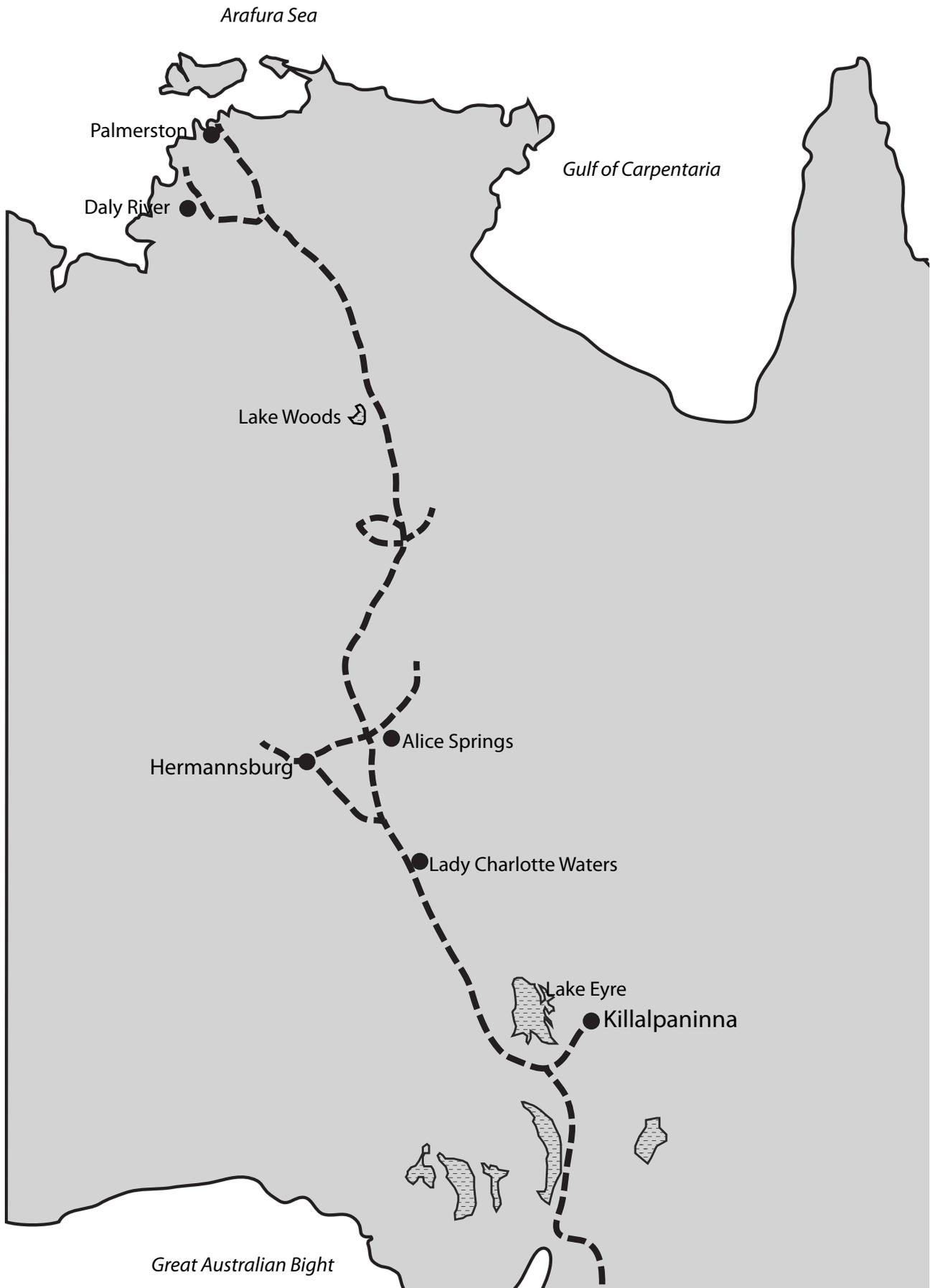


Figure 2: Sketch map of Eylmann's Australian travels 1896–1899 and 1900. Courtesy the author and Philip Knight.

who himself was able to pursue an amateur interest in anthropology, as he strove to understand the mental world and the culture of the indigenous people who gathered at Hermannsburg. Without the hospitality of Strehlow, the prolonged stays in the immediate vicinity of indigenous people, crucial to Eylmann's fieldwork, would have been impossible (Monteath 2013).

The second important connection Eylmann made during his Australian expeditions was with Francis Gillen. As with Strehlow, this connection had a practical dimension, because Eylmann was able to spend some time with the Irish-born Gillen as he travelled through Alice Springs, where Gillen was the post and telegraph station master. More importantly, Gillen was himself a seminal figure in Australian anthropology at that time, in large part because of his association with Baldwin Spencer in Melbourne. During Eylmann's visits Gillen was able to discuss the seminal work he was doing in collaboration with Spencer, but based in good part on observations Gillen was making in central Australia. Despite some initial suspicions of Eylmann's motives, Gillen shared information with Eylmann, reported to Spencer on the German's work, and in exchange extracted from Eylmann an undertaking to make a copy of a piece of Aboriginal artwork (Spencer & Gillen 1899: 631). Gillen's impressions of the visiting German are recorded in a letter to Spencer from 25 April 1896:

He was greatly interested in my Anthro photos and never tired of looking at them. He also evinced a curiosity as to native habits and Customs [...] A most interesting man this German, unmistakably a Gentleman, he has been a great deal in Egypt and the Soudan and is altogether an Emin Pasha like individual. (Mulvaney et al. 1997: 115)

As Eylmann never travelled to Melbourne, and Baldwin's visits to Central Australia never brought him into contact with Eylmann, those two men never met. Nonetheless, it is clear that in their approaches to anthropological fieldwork and in their understandings of indigenous Australia, Eylmann, Spencer and Gillen had much in common, with the result that Eylmann made extensive use of Spencer and Gillen's main works (Eylmann 1908; Spencer & Gillen 1899, 1904; Spencer & Horn 1896).

Having travelled extensively through South Australia, drawn on the advice of many and acquainted himself with the seminal literature in his field, back in Germany Eylmann devoted the following years to producing his great work on Australia, which was finally published in 1908 (Eylmann 1908). Some 500 pages in length, and accompanied by numerous photos and other illustrations,

*Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südastralien* presents a wide-ranging overview of indigenous Australia. Eylmann describes his intentions in its very first words: 'In this volume I have attempted to describe the physical and spiritual nature of the original population of the colony of South Australia in as much detail as possible' (Eylmann 1908: 6). He goes on then to record his observations of Aboriginal life in areas ranging from physical appearance, social organisation, burial practices, jewellery and weapons to medicine, infanticide, hunting and language. The book is an undoubtedly earnest attempt to record as thoroughly as he could every aspect of Australian Aboriginal life (Eylmann 1908).

## DISCUSSION

The anthropological career of Erhard Eylmann is illustrative of a particular phase in the development of the discipline. In the late nineteenth century, an age of accelerated globalisation, there was a great deal of scientific interest in peoples in many parts of the globe. Nowhere was this more evident than in Germany, where the fascination with the wider world outside Europe was already well established before the pursuit of a formal empire, and then it received a significant boost with the acquisition of the first German colonies in 1884 (Penny 2002; Penny & Bunzl 2003; Zimmerman 2001).

As anthropology was establishing its institutional foundations, many of its most dedicated supporters, like Erhard Eylmann, were enthusiastic amateurs who came to anthropology from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. It is evident from Eylmann's book that his intended readership was not just the professional anthropologist but also the legion of German laypeople who sought to quench an enormous thirst for knowledge about the world outside Germany, indeed outside Europe.

Similarly, as the discipline of anthropology developed and established itself in Eylmann's time, there was considerable variety in the understandings and conceptualisations of the discipline. There were many practitioners, like Eylmann, who came to the discipline from the natural sciences, who placed primary emphasis on empirical observation, on the description, measurement and analysis of humans and of artefacts as the keys to advancement of knowledge of the 'other'. This applies in a German context, for example in the cases of such seminal figures as Rudolf Virchow and Adolf Bastian, who came to anthropology via the study of medicine. But it applies also outside the German sphere, where it can be seen, for example, in the case of the British-born but Melbourne-based Baldwin Spencer, whose background was in biology and zoology. Regardless of their entry point or how

circuitous their path into anthropology was, what united these researchers across their national divides was a firm belief, explicit or otherwise, in the notion of the essential unity and interconnectedness of the scientific disciplines. Erhard Eylmann was no exception; indeed he displayed it through the encyclopaedic approach he adopted to the study of Australian Aborigines as well as his excursions into other fields of scientific enquiry (Courto 2004: 157).

It is important, however, to recognise that the approach adopted by Eylmann and shared by many other anthropologists, amateur and professional, was not the result of a disciplinary consensus. There were fundamental differences of approach, which, like the similarities, transcended national and cultural boundaries. Indeed, the most striking counterpoint to Eylmann's unwavering commitment to scientific objectivity came from his fellow-German Carl Strehlow. While on a quite practical level Strehlow provided assistance to Eylmann by allowing him to live at the Hermannsburg mission in central Australia for two extended periods, as anthropologists the two men were cut from quite different cloth. Strehlow came to the discipline via theology; he was interested in anthropology for its capacity to aid him in his primary concern, namely his missionary work. Thus he adopted a quite different intellectual paradigm, the keystones of which were intersubjectivity and hermeneutics (Veit 2004). In this approach, the anthropologists' central task was to facilitate and promote mutual understanding between Europeans and the representatives of starkly different cultures. The path to understanding the 'other' was primarily via language, culture and spiritual beliefs rather than physiology, physiognomy and artefacts. It was this approach which distinguishes Strehlow's own seven-volume magnum opus on the Aranda and Loritja people of Central Australia (Strehlow 1907–1920).

The intellectual divide between Eylmann and Strehlow was replicated in their interpersonal relations – the two men did not get on. Eylmann devotes the twenty-sixth and last of the chapters in his book to the activities of missionaries and delivers a damning condemnation: 'The Aborigines who are employed and looked after on the mission stations are far from transforming their lives to a devotion to God' (Eylman 1908: 465). Strehlow for his part found little joy in the presence at Hermannsburg of a countryman and appears to have kept his distance from Eylmann. After Eylmann arrived for his second visit to the mission, Strehlow wrote scathingly: 'The travelling scientist who turned up again some time ago is the same man who claims to be a medical doctor.[...] I have no great faith in him, since he is a real chatterbox who can't keep secrets to himself and who takes pleasure in maligning other people' (Strehlow 2011: 657).

For all their differences, the anthropological endeavours of Eylmann and Strehlow had one thing in common, and that is that they were largely ignored in Australia, the country to which they had devoted so much of their lives as well as their physical and intellectual labours. This state of affairs is attributable above all to circumstances which were largely beyond the control of scientists, namely world politics. Eylmann's book was published in 1908; the first of Strehlow's seven volumes in 1907. Heightened international tensions in the years leading to war, and then the outbreak of war itself, meant that neither man has received the attention he deserves in Australia. English readerships still have no access to full translations of their main works. Moreover, both men died prematurely in the 1920s, long before the damage of war could be undone and their legacy as pioneers of Australian anthropology established.

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