



**James L. Cox:** *Restoring the Chain of Memory: T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge*, 2018, Equinox, Bristol, CT.

In *Restoring the Chain of Memory: T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge* emeritus Professor James L. Cox (2018) presents seven years of detailed research into the life and work of twentieth-century Australian linguist Theodor George Henry Strehlow. Aside from what has been referred to as his '*magnum opus*', the nearly 800-page *Songs of Central Australia* (1971), Strehlow is known for his predominantly Arrernte collection of Indigenous Australian secret-sacred knowledge and artefacts. Cox begins his text by considering several criticisms levelled at Strehlow by biographers and academics concerning Strehlow's claims of ownership in relation to the collection, before contrasting this picture with one of Strehlow as both a non-Indigenous Arrernte 'insider', entrusted with helping to preserve the Arrernte and Loritja religions, and as a Phenomenologist of Religion, whose 'detailed discussion of Arrernte myths, ceremonies, song and social organization [aimed] primarily to demonstrate to his readers that Arrernte traditional religion was consistent with the religious longings of humans everywhere' (p. 147). To this end Cox sees the work of Strehlow, as well as his own text, as primarily guided by 'the phenomenological mantra that nothing

human ultimately is alien to other humans' (p. xix).

In Chapter 1 Cox notes that Strehlow, the son of a pastor tasked with reviving a connection between the Lutheran Church and the Indigenous peoples in the local area, spent most of his childhood as the only non-Indigenous child at the Hermannsburg Mission, 130 kilometres to the west of Alice Springs, in Central Australia. It was here that Strehlow grew up speaking not only fluent English and German, but the local Australian language Western Arrernte (it is estimated that roughly 250 Australian language groups existed at the time of colonisation, none of which was the imported English). This early exposure to Arrernte language and life enabled Strehlow to gain the trust of local Elders when he returned to the area in 1932. There he spent most of the next four decades researching 'not only the language of the peoples of the central desert region, but also their culture, religion, social organization, stories, songs, sacred sites and ceremonies' (pp. 2–3).

Though Cox uses the word 'al-tjira' throughout his text to refer to Arrernte religion, the most current form of the word used by Arrernte people themselves is 'altyerr'. As I understand it, the word is in a state of flux, because preferred spellings change, sometimes quite rapidly, as the Arrernte work to regain autonomy over a language that was once at risk of being stifled by British colonisers. In this review I have chosen to use the spelling currently

preferred by the Arrernte (thank you to Christine Nicholls for making me aware of these continuing shifts).

After his death Strehlow's vast collection of Arrernte and Loritja knowledge and artefacts was purchased by the Northern Territory Government and housed predominantly at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs. This collection contains roughly 4,500 song verses and 100 myths, written in Arrernte and Loritja, 26 hours of film featuring 800 ceremonial acts, 8,000 photographs, 150 detailed genealogies, and 1,200 artefacts. Of particular importance in the collection are the *tjurunga* (secret-sacred objects) that are at the heart of the Arrernte's *altyerr* (the Arrernte religion). These predominantly 'thin, flat items made of stone or wood' (p. 71) connected the Elders Strehlow researched to 'the stories of the times of the beginning and 'symbolized the power and authority of tradition' (p. 73).

As Cox notes early on, Strehlow's critics have painted him as betraying the Elders who entrusted him with their secret-sacred knowledge by claiming personal ownership over this collection and selling photos of secret-sacred ceremonies to the German magazine *Stern*, which were then reprinted in the Australian magazine *People*. To this day Arrernte people are split concerning whether Strehlow was a blessing or a curse. In response to critics Cox argues in Chapter 8 that both the Arrernte Elders and Strehlow himself were very aware of external forces that sought to

destroy Indigenous Australian religious practices, and that both acted with the collective aim of preserving quickly disappearing secret-sacred Arrernte religious knowledge. For Cox, the recognition of Indigenous agency is crucial in both Strehlow's initial gathering of knowledge and artefacts, as well as the Strehlow Research Centre's current repatriation efforts. Contrary to his critics, Chapter 9 stresses that neither the secret-sacred knowledge nor the *tjurunga* are now considered the property of Strehlow, the Strehlow Research Centre, or the Northern Territory Government, but belong 'to the legitimate heirs who are re-connecting with past traditions through the medium of the Strehlow Collection' (p. 171).

In Chapters 6 and 7 Cox portrays Strehlow as someone both aware of and attempting to resist 'the gradual commitment of local [Arrernte and Loritja] people to Christian values, accompanied by extensive efforts by the Government to assimilate the Indigenous population into mainstream white culture' (p. 113). In a paper he did not live to deliver Strehlow expresses this when he says '[i]t is now five minutes before midnight and then will come that oblivion that has no end' (p. 5). As well as preserving disappearing Arrernte religious knowledge, it is argued that Strehlow also worked to challenge various theoretical and racist misconceptions that led scholars like Sir James Frazer, whom Strehlow quotes in *Aboriginal Religion* (1978), to claim that Indigenous

Australians were 'the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information' (p. 143).

A large portion of Cox's text is dedicated to providing a clear picture of the complex nature of Arrernte religious life, as Strehlow documented across numerous texts. In Chapter 2 Cox emphasizes the necessary and sufficient conditions of kinship systems and geographical location in his working definition of 'Indigenous Religion' before drawing these conditions out of Strehlow's descriptions of Arrernte religious life. To my mind it is Chapters 3 to 5 where Cox's work is at its most illuminating. Here, he shows how Strehlow's work weaves a coherent narrative through the Arrernte understanding of time, death, and the afterlife, while highlighting crucial differences between the *altyerr* creation ancestors and the Christian God.

Cox begins Chapter 3 by contrasting the Arrernte concept of '*altyerr*' with the problematic but popular English translation of 'Dream Time'. Strehlow argued that the complex notion of '*altyerr*' roughly translates as 'out of all eternity', 'from all eternity', or 'ever from the beginning' (p. 50), and was highly critical of anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen's (1899) misinterpretation of the term in their *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, where they defined '*altyerr*' (spelled by them as 'alcheringa') as 'a name given to the far past times in which the mythical ancestors of the tribe are supposed to have lived' (p. 41). Here Cox also draws on Stre-

hlow's extensive research to bring out the complex relation between Arrernte individuals and their totemic ancestors, who Cox quotes Strehlow as claiming are 'born out of their own eternity' (p. 45). A picture of how Arrernte religion is embodied in everyday life is then developed in Chapter 4, where Cox outlines Strehlow's notion of a 'personal monototemism in a polytotemic community'. Of central importance is one's personal connection with a particular totemic ancestor through the location of 'where the future mother first became aware that she was pregnant' (p. 60).

Cox concludes this detailed picture of the Arrernte's *altyerr* in Chapter 5 with a discussion of what he calls Strehlow's 'phenomenological method'. This method, according to Cox, aims to provide 'a thorough study of the rituals through which religious beliefs come to life and become real to the participants' (p. 81). Cox traces aspects of Strehlow's accounts of Arrernte initiation, increase, and commemoration songs and ceremonies to argue that Strehlow's 'primary aim was to encourage understanding of Arrernte religion among a wide range of outside audiences, both in Australia and internationally', as well as to 'promote tolerance and improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (p. 83). In a relatively new 'white' country actively working to dissolve its numerous Indigenous identities, Cox shows Strehlow's work to be an invaluable tool of preservation.

Overall, Cox's text is an impressively detailed discussion of what

he admits is a 'tangled web of complicated issues' (p. 184) surrounding Strehlow and his life's work. At times this can feel slightly jarring, as Cox attempts to balance several perspectives at once, particularly in the later chapters, when Strehlow is positioned in relation to questions of knowledge, repatriation, methodology, and legacy. On the one hand, after the relatively easy transitions between the early chapters focusing on the Arrernte religion, when the text turns to positioning Strehlow within the academic, political, and social spheres of twentieth-century Australia, the reader may at times feel that their attention is drawn off into specifics that take them too far away from a clear picture of Strehlow's legacy, particularly in relation to the controversies highlighted at the beginning of the text. On the other hand, a reader interested in the particularities of each of these later chapters – for example the somewhat awkwardly placed discussion of Strehlow as an 'insider' and phenomenologist of religion in Chapter 7 – can easily locate a particular aspect of Strehlow of interest to them.

This minor issue aside, Cox's text provides an important window into the life and work of a man concerned with preserving the disappearing Indigenous Australian religions to which he was first exposed as a child, and to bring out important aspects of a common humanity in a young colonised country obsessed with whiteness. This text should be read by anyone interested in Stre-

hlow's life's work, as well as anyone interested in the study of Indigenous religions in general and Indigenous Australian religions in particular.

**Ryan Manhire**

Åbo Akademi University,  
Finland, and Flinders University,  
Australia

RYAN MANHIRE is a PhD Candidate in philosophy at Åbo Akademi University, Finland, and Flinders University, Australia.  
E-mail: manh0005@flinders.edu.au