"A Straight-out Man"

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Barbara Henson. *A Straight-out Man*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992, 313pp.

The work of missionaries among Australian Aborigines has been as much misunderstood in recent decades as it was uncritically praised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is true that missionaries have often moved into indigenous cultures when they were neither needed nor wanted, and it is true that they were often unwittingly complicit with the worst kinds of commercial exploitation of native people. This, however, is not true of the Lutheran missionaries in Central Australia, who, from the middle of the last century have been responsible for saving the lives of hundreds of Aboriginal people. Since the invasion of 1788 could not be reversed, these missionaries did, at the least, assist the transition of many Aboriginal people from tribal life to a more settled life-style where, if they often met new sufferings imposed by white civilisation, they also escaped some of the sufferings imposed by nature. The Lutheran missions did their best to insure that benefits, as far as they could see them, outweighed the Aborigines' losses.

One of the most remarkable of the Lutheran missionaries was Pastor Friedrich Wilhelm Albrecht, born in Poland in 1894, and educated at Hermannsburg Lutheran missionary institute in Northern Germany. Albrecht suffered from a permanent limp caused by a fall when he was twelve months old, but the events of his life bear no mark of his handicap. After World War 1 deflected his studies to medical training, he was forced to join a Red Cross unit of the German army, and under the appalling conditions of front line medical service, he contracted cholera and was left to die at a Russian farmhouse. Surviving, he managed to rejoin his unit, but on visiting his home village found that his family had been transported to Siberia where five of his brothers and sisters died. Albrecht himself was awarded the highest order of the Iron Cross for rescuing wounded men under fire, and after discharge from the German army he returned to his studies at Hermannsburg, barely escaping being shot by German soldiers on the way.

In 1923 Albrecht accepted a call to serve at the Hermannsburg Mission on the north bank of the Finke River in Central Australia. He travelled via the Lutheran Seminary in Iowa, where he studied and improved his English, and in 1925, in Winnipeg, he married his fianceé Minna Gevers who had travelled from Hamburg to join him. After arriving in Central Australia early in 1926, Minna and Albrecht never left Australia again. Minna died in November 1983 and Albrecht in March 1984, a few months before his ninetieth birthday.

Barbara Henson's account of Friedrich Albrecht's life is more than a well-researched and well-written biography. The book justly received the 1993 Jessie Litchfield Award for Literature from the University of the Northern Territory. It is neither a eulogy nor an apologia for the work of Lutheran missionaries. The Aborigines found Albrecht sincere, consistent, principled, just

and straight-talking, a "straight-out man," as Aboriginal Pastor Nahasson Ungkwanaka told Henson in 1986. These are also the qualities of Henson's work. It contributes, in a scholarly way, to what is already known of the history of Hermannsburg from writing such as that of T.G.H. Strehlow, who was born at Hermannsburg in 1908 where his father, Carl, was then in charge. With less understanding of the spiritual value of Aboriginal myth than T.G.H. Strehlow, but with greater understanding of Aboriginal spirituality than Carl Strehlow, Albrecht never compromised his Christian teachings, but never spoke like a fanatic.

Henson is as aware as any sensitive, informed scholar of the changes in white comprehension of Aboriginal values, and she is aware that Albrecht's attitudes do not always coincide with contemporary feeling. Without apologising for ideas that seem misguided today, she sets them in the context of what Albrecht saw and knew, and the possibilities open or closed to him by church or Government policies. Throughout his life, Albrecht could see no place for Aboriginal ceremonies and rites in the Christian community, and he did not change his position when younger men, trained in sociology and anthropology, realised that Aboriginal religious culture was integral to their social coherence. Other aspects of tribal organisation and language Albrecht always respected, and he himself became fluent so that he could preach in Aranda and could speak in several other dialects. In later life he was profoundly distressed by changes in mission policy which gave positive recognition to Aboriginal culture, and he made many unsuccessful attempts to understand the new values and climate when they were explained to him by his son Paul, now a field superintendent in the Lutheran church. Albrecht was always a profound and sincere Lutheran, representing the goodness, austerity, industry and intellectuality of the church at its very best. One notable and simple reason for the long-term success of Hermannsburg and other Lutheran missions among Aboriginal people was that the church did not pursue and would not allow an easy conversion. No one was ever baptised into the church unless the pastors felt assured that the person understood as well as they were able what the conversion represented.

In one matter, the pastor showed what some readers of this biography will regard as unusual percipience: in 1940 Albrecht risked his life by interceding in tribal marriage arrangements because he believed the traditional allocation of very young women to old men no longer had whatever communal justification it once enjoyed. Young people were leaving the tribes, and fights broke out and serious injuries were incurred during disputes over the allocation of young girls. Albrecht explained that his apparently outrageous suggestions were not intended to ridicule tribal law, but to show that as conditions changed, it might be better for the tribe to have a general meeting before allocating marriageable girls, and to allow the girls and young men some say in the discussions: "They would be more content to stay with the tribe, and the whole community would benefit." To his surprise, several men agreed, and when he left the following morning, a large group of women came to farewell him: "It must have been the first time, he thought, that anybody had spoken up for them."

Albrecht was not simply a religious teacher and preacher. Much more than the Lutheran mission board sometimes approved, his work was practical, involving travelling on camel or foot hundreds of miles to visit outlying districts to look into poor conditions, and involving much writing and communication with Government bodies in Adelaide. He had many sound achievements in practical matters of some magnitude, like building a pipeline through five miles of limestone country to bring water from Kaporilja Springs to Hermannsburg, so that vegetable gardens covering several acres could be grown, with noticeable improvements in community health. After urging the Government for many years, he secured the region of Haasts Bluff as a ration depot, and later as a full settlement, and helped bring to an end tribal fighting and the depredations of white exploitation in that region. Appalled by the seven-year drought that had killed so many Aborigines in the 1920's, Albrecht always maintained a full store-house of basic supplies, including wholegrain wheat which he obtained with a donated subsidy from Adelaide. So plentiful were his stores that at the outbreak of World War 11 the German mission was investigated on the suspicion that Albrecht's pantry was intended to feed invading enemy troops.

When Albrecht came to Hermannsburg he found there a young man of twenty-four whom he knew as Albert. In 1932 two Melbourne artists, John Gardner and Rex Battarbee, asked permission to paint in the region, and on seeing their exhibition of locally painted work in the mission schoolroom, Albert told Albrecht, "I think I can do that too. " Albrecht supplied the young man with paint and brushes, and suggested he offer his services to the artists as a camel man in return for painting lessons. Albert Namatjira's story has been told elsewhere, but in 1951 Albrecht published a pamphlet for sale at the mission. In Henson's words:

> The article was both informative and personal, sketching the man's early life on the mission in 'the patriarchy' of Carl Strehlow's era. Namatjira had clashed with Strehlow, married a Loritja woman from another district, and often sought employment beyond the mission. The article also reflected Albrecht's concern for the impact that Namatjira's increasing income was having on himself and others — his habit of taking men to town for indefinite periods, the continued carelessness with which he handled his financial affairs, the discontent created in the mission community by the disparity in incomes. He thought Namatjira's lack of concern for the material possessions he acquired entirely natural for a man only one generation removed from bush life, but questioned the implications for his future: "Looking into the future, we cannot conceal a great amount of apprehension; he would have gained very little if through the dazzling lights of publicity and wealth he should lose himself — a wanderer between two worlds."

In 1958 Namatjira was gaoled, on the charge of repeatedly supplying liquor to non-exempted Aborigines, a proceeding that brought ill-health, fighting, injuries and physical danger to others, including Namatjira's wife, Rubina, of whom the artist boasted that because he was a free citizen he could kill her if he liked. Albrecht, believing that a stay in gaol away from alcohol would

help the artist, did not join the chorus of protest across the country from Australians who knew nothing of the danger Namatjira posed to himself and others: "Albert", he wrote, "deserves our deep sympathy, but he will never be helped by being treated like some pet, instead of a responsible person." Albrecht knew that the immediate guilt lay with white people who fêted Namatjira and encouraged him to drink without any understanding of the man and his circumstances. Albrecht himself had liked his cigar (on the rare occasions he could afford one) and his wine, but he gave up both so that he could set a better example to his people. When Namatjira died in 1959, after serving an "open" sentence at another Lutheran mission, Albrecht conducted his funeral service, taking the text from Corinthians, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." As Henson writes, "It was characteristic of Albrecht to try to trace the fundamentals of the man's life and identity. Namatjira was, and had remained, a member of the Aranda tribe in Central Australia, and in this basic alignment he had received every encouragement from the mission."

The biography also deals extensively with Minna's life. There is a continuous narrative telling of the birth of her five children, her perseverance through ill-health, her management of the extensive mission gardens, her loneliness and concern that her husband's multitude of responsibilities allowed him too little time for his family, her isolation in Adelaide at the beginning of World War 11 when most non-army personnel were excluded from Central Australia, and her sustaining friendships with several other women, including Frieda Strehlow, the widow of Carl and mother of Theodor.

Writing biography and autobiography has become a curious and interesting process to-day. Sophisticated readers are very aware that the value of the enterprise depends greatly on the biographer's declaring the position from which she or he writes. Henson does this in a brief Preface in which she explains how her childhood at the base of Cape York Peninsula, west of the Great divide, created her understanding of the difference between coastal urban Australia and the inland, and how she was puzzled to place the Christian God within the outback landscape. The dedication to her mother and father, "remembering especially my mother's interest and feeling for a world and people beyond her immediate ken, and my father's capacity for commitment to a chosen task," evokes not only Pastor Albrecht's sympathies and dedication, but the qualities Henson has brought to her biography.

The writer had access to great quantities of records and letters, many posing the necessity of translation from German, and in her Note on Sources explains that "Pastor Albrecht was a natural communicator," who believed that not only the church but the public and politicians needed to understand Aboriginal and mission issues, and who wrote hundreds of pamphlets and letters to this end. Undoubtedly, many of the ideas held by those recently enlightened people who now condemn missions indiscriminately for their interference in Aboriginal life, were held and practised by men like Albrecht whose able, unsparing dedication was worth a million pious platitudes from urban whites.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *A Straight-out Man* is the constant presence of the Aboriginal people and their voice. The cover is an early Namatjira painting, the chapter-heads are decorated with a continuous

embellishment of a photograph of Aborigines with the pastor, and many pages have small photographic icons of Aborigines. The use of westernised photographs and the avoidance of traditional Aboriginal designs are a rare example of sensitive good taste.

Most importantly, direct transcripts from tapes made by many different speakers recorded by Henson, and fully attributed in the Notes, preface each chapter and are interspersed with the text. The book is shared equally by the presence of Albrecht and that of the Aboriginal people he served so honestly and to the best of his abilities.