IT SEEMS TO BE only a couple of years ago that my students declared gender and race to be the ‘hot’ topics in culture. Now, I confidently predict, they will relegate gender (still acknowledging its importance) and reformulate the second term by adding a third: race and its intersection with religion, in its broadest definition. *Broken Song* analyses the fraught relationships that exist and have existed between indigenous Australians and those ‘ministering’ to them, whether via missionary, welfare, legal or academic agencies. T.G.H. Strehlow (1908–78), who turbulently enacted all those roles, demonstrates how even the best intentions are inadequate compensation for colonial inequities.

Barry Hill’s biography and intellectual history of Strehlow is an important, monumental study of that giant of linguistic anthropology. It is ambitious in scope, negotiating historical perspectives scrupulously and in the spirit of post-colonialism. There is ample scholarship and circumspect sifting of evidence to admire here. Dialogues are tucked away in delectable footnotes and endnotes, enabling Hill to signal ongoing debates such as those he has with the Strehlow Research Foundation. In return for the use of the diaries, the foundation required surveillance of the contents. Nonetheless, Hill vigilantly registers his dissent through telling details: for example, the story of the removal of identifying tags by Strehlow’s widow from items whose return is requested by Arrernte people. The troubled legacy of Strehlow is enacted in the pages of this work.

Strehlow was the first anthropologist to speak an indigenous language, and, Hill argues, employs perspectives drawn from literary studies and linguistics to amplify anthropology. Hill’s book can be read as a post-colonial counter to Strehlow’s masterpiece, *Songs of Central Australia* (1971). Hill begins his biography with his own romance with that seminal text, conveying poetically the excitement of the encounter. He dramatically critiques his initial engagement with *Songs* in the course of the biography, offering superbly nuanced literary criticism and an extended meditation on the incommensurabilities of cultures, languages and translation. Hill exposes Strehlow’s methodologies, and evaluates the larger claims Strehlow famously made for Arrernte traditional ‘poetry’ in the repertoire of the world’s great oral literatures. He also lays out for inspection how Strehlow’s education in...
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English at the University of Adelaide made him hostage to modernist assumptions about the centrality of the aesthetic, valorising the Word at the expense of Country. Another fascinating dimension to the literariness and imperialism of Strehlow’s enterprise is the astonishing revelation that he worked on Songs by day and translated the Bible into Arrernte by night. As Hill succinctly puts it: ‘The book that celebrated Caliban was, then, written by Luther’s man.’

The book itself is riveting. Ted Strehlow’s life was nothing if not full of egomania, drama and pain, arising from his discomforting location at the interface of Lutheran missionary zeal and his (limited) capacity for cultural relativism. His fascination with the ‘sacramental’ meant that he collected in a spirit different from that of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen who had no qualms about selling profoundly sacred artefacts to pay gambling debts or displaying them in the museums. Despite many moving accounts of the intent with which Strehlow undertook his guardianship of Tjurunga, and the sensitivity with which he eased the concern of dying traditional owners, the case against him is strong. His fatal flaw, the seeds of his tragedy, lay in his acquisitiveness and his unshakeable conviction that he alone was the melancholy undertaker of traditional Arrernte culture. Could indigenous culture not modernise, engage in strategic hybridity and remain proudly different? Was it to be confined to the category of the ‘primitive’? Strehlow, according to Hill, was a confirmed social Darwinist who failed to question doomed race theories.

His relationships with Arrernte men seem, dismayingly, to have been more pragmatic than personal. Because of his investment in tradition and his relative youthfulness, it’s not surprising that he lost older indigenous friends such as Tom Ljonga, Rauwiraka and Gurra, but why did the friendships with younger men formed as a child in the sand of the Finke River not survive? Did he lack a gift for intimacy? Or did his belief that non-traditional Arrernte could not merit respect blind him to the claims of friendship? His loyal defence of Max Stuart out of admiration for his grandfather is the only redeeming Arrernte friendship of his later years, and it is ironic that he did not live to enjoy Stuart’s subsequent political stature. A lack of capacity for friendship is not restricted to Arrernte: Ted did not profit from the enduring friendship of Ronald Berndt during the Stern fiasco. And yet, as a welfare worker and a thinker about social policy, he was a passionate man with a clear sense of moral purpose. Some of his reformist ideas (about child removal, language preservation and the need for land rights) seem very contemporary.

Underpinning Strehlow’s conservatism, Hill discerns an Oedipal drama. Curiously, although Strehlow defined himself, as sons do, in contradistinction to his father’s work, nonetheless Ted did not adequately acknowledge just how foundational his father Carl’s work on language and myths was to his own achievement. Carl Strehlow’s moderation of his strict Lutheranism and ‘conversion’ to the study of Arrernte, in the face of his Lutheran superior’s opposition, emerge as an intriguing subtext of this book, and one inviting closer scrutiny. Other denied fathers include Rousseau and the Freud of Totem and Taboo.

As Richard Ellmann’s great biography of Oscar Wilde demonstrates, it is an advantage to biographers if the lives they document have the shape of a tragedy, as Strehlow’s does. Hill recapitulates Strehlow’s frequent return late in life, to his fourteen-year-old self’s presence at the death of his father at Horseshoe Bend in 1922. Hill would have us believe that this primal love–hate narrative was a defining one, and even one with an Arrernte mythological groundswell.

One of the puzzles of this book is that Arrernte informants do not figure more prominently. Could this be another legacy of Strehlow’s corrosive divisiveness? Hill locates himself carefully as a non-Arrernte speaker, and as someone who is doing a European critique of a flawed, essentially European academic. The full post-colonial record urgently needs contemporary Arrernte responses. Fortunately, for all Strehlow’s pessimism about the survival of Arrernte cultures, his work has been deployed in a spirit he did not intend — to argue continuity of culture in land claims.

This book will appeal to many different kinds of readers: anthropologists will recognise in it the dilemmas and responsibilities of an unequal exchange, and the heartache; literary critics will read with huge interest a history of their discipline delivered slant; historians will enjoy its judicious dialogue between colonialist and the post-colonial perspectives; and general readers will soak up the drama of lives lived in unusually challenging conditions. The most important class of readers will no doubt be Arrernte people themselves, and it is to be hoped that their responses will soon be set down.