

LUISE ANNA HERCUS AM FAHA

1926–2018



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With the death of Luise Hercus on 15 April 2018 after a short illness, we have lost a unique researcher in two fields, Australian and Indic languages, a great humanist, and a bridge with some of the continent's most knowledgeable indigenous scholars, whose deep knowledge of their traditions of language, song and place she was able to secure through scores of long-term, respectful friendships and collaborative work on recording and analysing Aboriginal languages.

This is a death that has been deeply felt not just among her family and the community of scholars, but by a vast network of Aboriginal people in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory, befitting someone who in over half a century of fieldwork recorded more than 56 languages and dialects, repeatedly forming close friendships with those who worked with her to secure their knowledge for future generations. This impact extended out to descendants of her teachers, even when she had never met them. One such person, Aaron Paterson (Yandruwandha descendant of Bennie Kerwin of Innamincka and Nelly Parker of Nappa Merrie), sent an email to be read at her funeral, stating: 'She created a bridge today that we the current generation can cross before that bridge gets burnt.'

The breadth and longevity of her scholarly impact can be gauged from the fact that she received two dedicated volumes – one occasioned by her formal 'retirement' at 65, where her Indo-Aryan colleagues presented her with a collection of her articles, and a second to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. 'Retirement' was a theoretical concept for Luise – she continued to make field-trips to remote parts of Australia such as Birdsville and the Simpson Desert at least once a year, making her last trip to Birdsville in 2017, and her flow of publications continued unabated. Even in the nursing home where she spent her last years, she was to be found sitting up in bed using the latest transcription software to type her way through the vast body of texts she had recorded over more than 50 years of fieldwork – over 1,000 hours of recorded material.

She was born Luise Anna Schwarzschild in Munich on 16 January 1926 to one of the Jewish intellectual dynasties of Central Europe: her father Alfred was an artist, his brother Karl and Karl's son Martin Schwarzschild were pioneers in astrophysics, while her Catholic mother Theodora was a pianist. She and most of her family managed to escape Nazi Germany, fleeing to England in 1938. Plunged into Tollington High School as a 'friendly enemy alien', she soon learned English thanks to schoolgirl twin classmates assigned to look after her as a Lenten penance and they became life-long friends. By 1943 she won a scholarship to Oxford University, initially specialising in Medieval French, achieving first-class honours in Romance languages, and being offered a lectureship in Romance languages even before she sat the final examination. She also studied Sanskrit and Prakrit with Thomas Burrow, Indo-Aryanist and Dravidianist, in 1947 becoming the first ever female Boden Scholar of Sanskrit and obtaining first-class honours in Oriental Studies in 1948.

The next migratory twist of fate came when she met Australian physicist Graham Hercus, studying for a PhD at Oxford. They married in 1955 and she came out with him to Melbourne, where their son Iain was born in 1957. Given the dearth of jobs for Sanskrit specialists, she taught Sanskrit at the University of Melbourne on a voluntary basis and continued to write articles on Indo-Aryan languages.

A crucial turn came in the early 1960s when she learned from an Aboriginal child from Warrnambool on a school visit that – contrary to widespread opinion at the time – there were still people in Victoria who knew some of their language. The idea prevailing in most university language departments at the time (there were no departments of linguistics yet) was that ‘when there were no monolingual speakers, whatever is left is “corrupted” and not worthy of study’. This did not prevent Luise from embarking, in 1962, on an exhaustive and tireless campaign to locate every Aboriginal person in Victoria who might still retain fragments of their native languages, visiting rural communities, fringe camps, prisons, hospitals and institutions for the aged: ‘It would probably be true to say that there are no elderly or even middle-aged person of Aboriginal descent in Victoria and the south of New South Wales who have not at some stage been questioned by us about the language. However fragmentary the resulting material may appear, it represents all that was left in 1962–1966, and several important informants have since died’.

This was very much a family enterprise, with Graham driving her, on weekends and during annual leave, and Iain listening to the old people or playing with the children. Luise’s philological training not only prepared her for phonological characteristics of Australian languages, such as retroflex consonants, but also – particularly when her interests began to extend out to areas such as the Simpson Desert – to the unstudied domain of indigenous oral literature through its vast song cycles and their connection to country.

From early on the connection between being a ‘last speaker’ and a ‘last singer’ became apparent, her teachers stressing the close interconnection between language and song. At the end of her first day recording Wemba-Wemba from Stan Day in Echuca in 1962, he sang her a song he had learned from his grandfather:

To him and to other ‘last speakers’ language and song were inseparable, and a song was something very special. People wanted the songs and traditions to be recorded for the future: they somehow felt that this was the voice of their culture.

Yet this ran against the institutional strictures of the day – some influential academics felt that mixing disciplines was amateurish and that ‘songs were to be left strictly to the musicologists’, to the point where she received a letter from her funding body, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, saying her fieldwork grant would not be renewed unless she stopped recording songs. But in this, as in so much else, she was never one to follow trends, and her own recordings of indigenous songs and her subsequent interdisciplinary work with musicologists like Catherine Ellis and Grace Koch constitute one of the most valuable elements of her work.

In 1969 her first major publication on Australian languages appeared – the two volume book *Victorian Languages: A Late Survey*, which contains information provided by the last rememberers of at least ten Victorian languages, with particularly rich information on Wergaia and Wemba-Wemba. In the same year, she was appointed senior lecturer in Sanskrit at the ANU, under an arrangement that allowed her to commute weekly from the family home in Melbourne but devote large portions of the non-teaching period to linguistic fieldwork.

When her husband contracted cancer, she nursed him until his death in 1974. This was a grievous blow, but she bought a farm outside Gundaroo near Canberra, naming it Kintala after the word for ‘dog’ in Diyari, the language of the Cooper’s Creek region.

By the mid-1960s she had begun work in South Australia, New South Wales, and South-west Queensland. This widening geographical reach brought her into contact with fluent speakers with whom she could learn to converse in the language and plumb the full depths of its subtleties. Her first encounter of this type, with Arabana man Tim Strangways, happened more or less by chance:

Tim was just sitting there, nobody was recording his language. So that he should not feel left out, I asked him a few words. It was obvious at once that here was not only a fluent speaker, but a brilliant teacher. In a flash I saw the sheer folly of pursuing only that which was not there, and rejecting a language that was still alive, namely Arabana. So I began a long association with Arabana people, and soon came to meet Tim’s nephew by marriage Mick McLean Irinjili... He made me aware of the importance of traditions and we went on expeditions twice and even three times a year gradually covering most of the north-east of South Australia. Over a long period of time he recited all the vast store of oral literature that he held.

The ensuing grammar of Arabana-Wangkangurru is probably the finest of the six grammars she produced of different Australian languages (in addition to four published dictionaries). But even more significant than her contributions to grammatical and lexical description is the immense number of song-cycles and mythological networks she recorded, transcribed and translated, assembling thousands of what historian Dick Kimber called ‘perfect shards, giving us a light in the darkness’. For the Lake Eyre region alone she recorded information in Wangkangurru about 43 major interlinking mythological networks, myth and song lines, and minor or localised ancestors, over some 60 trips to the Lake Eyre region (typically of four to six weeks’ duration) with Aboriginal elders. In addition to these classical narratives, she was also a pioneer in publishing oral histories of

Aboriginal people (serving for nearly 40 years on the editorial board of the journal *Aboriginal History*) and of documenting indigenous placenames, co-editing three volumes on this topic. She also provided much assistance in site documentation, and in native title claims in southern Australia. As Luise herself put it, 'My work is one of preservation. You do it so that people are not just a name on a tribal map but are remembered as actual people, with ideas and stories of their own'.

Luise was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1978, one of the first women ever to be elected, and one of our longest serving Fellows. She also served on the Academy Council from 1983 to 1987, and as Vice-President from 1985 to 1986. She was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1995, and awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001.

Her eccentricity was renowned and wide-ranging. She adopted orphaned wombats and kangaroos, when necessary bringing the young in warm sacks to classes or meetings, she took advantage of field-trips to collect all sorts of spawn so as to have a diverse frog population in the ponds she created in their original family home at Mooroolbark outside Melbourne, and took TAFE courses most years to obtain skills in welding, panel-beating, wool-classing, and fitting and turning.

But more important were her fundamental humanity and generosity: she remained in regular touch with her vast network of language teachers, sending them Christmas cards and hard-to-obtain gifts such as mouth organs. From the late 1970s she devoted considerable time to

working in Aboriginal communities with the younger, linguistically dispossessed generations, so as to open up for wider use the contents of the grammars she had originally written in a more scholarly style and to assist language revitalisation programs in the many dozens of communities she remained in contact with, and where she counted so many dear friends.

After her retirement, besides continuing her fieldwork at a pace that barely flagged, Luise formed the nucleus of a Canberra-based network of scholars of Aboriginal studies who have met for weekly lunches since the 1990s, where she inspired and transmitted her ethos to many scores of younger Australianists.

Nicolas Rothwell, in his fine depiction of one of her expeditions into the Simpson Desert, called her a 'living ark of near-lost grammars, song-cycles and words'. In that same piece, she recounts how the Wangkangurru language possesses 'a special word for the idea of leaving for the last time: they'd speak of "leaving by one track only"'. This remarkable, generous, unbending woman has now left by that track. But she leaves behind a vast network of knowledge-tracks that, without her, would have certainly been irrevocably erased.

Luise is survived by her son Iain Hercus, daughter-in-law Anne-Mari Siiteri, and by her many colleagues and friends, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who owe so much to her.

NICHOLAS EVANS FAHA AND JANE SIMPSON