Death, God and Linguistics: Conversations with Missionaries on the Australian Frontier, 1824 – 1845

by

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Abstract

The first encounters between Aborigines and Europeans in south-eastern Australia were constrained by profound social and linguistic barriers, but they did provide opportunities for cultural exchange. This article argues that important evidence is contained in linguistic materials compiled by missionaries for the purposes of evangelisation and scripture translation. It interprets the linguistic work of Lancelot Threlkeld (1788-1859), who conducted a mission on behalf of London Missionary Society and, later, the government of New South Wales, to the 'Awabakal' or *Kuri* people of the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie region from 1824-1841, and William Watson (1793-1866) and James Günther (1806-1879) of the Church Missionary Society, whose mission was to the Wiradhurri people of Wellington Valley, NSW, from 1832 to1845, as sources for life on the colonial frontier. It argues that linguistic sources provide a unique insight, expressed in languages now extinguished, into the conversations conducted by missionaries on issues such as language difficulties, the nature of the soul, spiritual beings, death, violence and the disintegration of traditional society.

Death, God and Linguistics: Conversations with Missionaries on the Australian Frontier, 1824 – 1845

This is a tale of two missions in colonial New South Wales. The first was conducted by Lancelot Threlkeld (1788-1859) among the *Kuri* or 'Awabakal' people of the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie districts north of Sydney; from 1824 Threlkeld operated as an agent of the London Missionary Society (LMS) but following his dismissal by the Society in 1829, the mission was continued under the auspices of the government of New South Wales until 1841. The second mission was located on the other side of the Great Dividing Range and was conducted from 1832 until 1844 by the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) among the Wiradhurri people of Wellington Valley.[1] Both of these ventures, like all pre-Victorian missions to Aboriginal people in Australia, were failures:[2] despite years of strenuous physical and intellectual effort, neither the LMS nor the CMS missionaries baptised any adult converts to Christianity or trained and ordained any native ministers. Today, neither mission site retains any visible signs of the buildings, chapels and burial grounds that once marked their existence. Indeed, by the time both missions collapsed under the weight of multiple burdens including the death of many of the Aborigines the missionaries had come to convert, personal divisions between the missionaries, resistance by the Aborigines to the missionaries' spiritual message, and the sheer difficulty of living at what was then the outermost limit of the frontier of European settlement, the missionaries were damaged and disappointed men.

Yet despite these failures, the missionaries did succeed in one important aspect of their work, namely the description of the languages of the Aboriginal people. Both missions created an important linguistic legacy which includes word lists and grammars, some

scripture translations, and numerous illustrative sentences. This material is the basis for the investigation which follows into the conversations of missionaries and Aborigines in the heart of the contact zone during the most bitter phase of the passing of the frontier in south-eastern Australia.

Missionary Linguistics and Colonialism

From the time of the first voyage of James Cook (1768-1771), European explorers, and colonisers in Australia made a habit of collecting lists of words from the Aboriginal people with whom they came into contact. While some of these words lists are longer than others, most can provide only limited information about the people encountered across a profound linguistic and cultural chasm.[3] These limitations were exacerbated in the case of vocabularies, such as the extensive word lists published by Edward Curr in 1886-1887, which were collected through standardised questionnaires.[4]

Unlike the fleeting encounters reflected in explorer word lists (which generally concluded with the departure of the visitor on other, more pressing, business) missionary encounters had a different intellectual trajectory, one that had as its objective the acquisition of language as the prelude to a deeper cultural exchange and aimed to culminate in the translation of scripture and the conversion of mission subjects. Typical of such first exchanges are the sentences which the missionary Lancelot Thelkeld collected during meetings with the people of the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie districts in the 1820s and 1830s: 'What is this?' 'What is that?', he might ask, or 'Where have you come from?'[5] From such beginnings the missionary might proceed to more complex interrogations, such as these Wiradhurri sentences collected by James Günther in the Wellington Valley district in the 1830s: 'What is your name?' 'Who has made you?',

before advancing in due course to spiritual conversations with questions such as: 'Have you got a soul?' and eventually, 'Do you know where your souls are going to go when you die?'[6] The history of Christian mission is therefore inextricably bound up with the history of linguistics, as work by Derek Peterson, Rachael Gilmour and Otto Zwartjes and have demonstrated in other colonial and post-colonial contexts.[7]

The assessment of missionary linguistics has been problematised in recent years by the recognition that language is a medium for the maintenance of power in colonial contexts, and indeed any context in which a more powerful speaker communicates with a less powerful speaker of another language. [8] By controlling access to literacy, [by] choosing which languages were to be privileged above other local variants as the one to have scriptural authority - in these and numerous other ways, missionary linguistics worked to control indigenous cultures. Throughout the colonised world, European languages were imposed as the medium of instruction, government and commerce, almost always to the detriment of other languages. In later Australian missions, it was common for children to be separated from their parents for the purposes of education and discipline, for instruction to be given only in the dominant language, and for children to be punished for speaking in their native language. In their most extreme form, these policies, often enforced through missionaries, have been derided as 'linguistic colonialism'.[9] Other commentators have given more emphasis to the challenges faced by early linguistists, including missionaries, who attempted to make field descriptions of Australian Aboriginal languages. .[10] In either case, it should be recognised that missionaries at both the missions considered in this study had relatively little power to impose linguistic conditions on their informants.

Putting aside for the time being the study of missionary linguistic materials for scientific purposes, and the debate about the extent to which missionary linguistics facilitated the hegemonic establishment of the dominant European languages, this article focuses on different issues. It examines linguistic texts created by missionaries for evidence about the way the missionaries came to understand aspects of Aboriginal society, culture and religion, all of which were undergoing profound stress under the multiple impacts of disease, frontier violence and the environmental pressure created by European agriculture, pastoralism and settlement. But before the missionaries were able to begin the work of evangelisation, they had first to learn the difficult new languages of the native people. Of the early attempts to do this, the most significant in terms of published grammars, dictionaries and translations of scripture (the usual measures of success) were those of Lancelot Threlkeld at Lake Macquarie, and the CMS missionaries at Wellington Valley, NSW.

Lancelot Threlkeld and the *Kuri*

Threlkeld has attracted attention from historians in recent years as an exemplar of the rhetoric of missionary discourse, and as one of a small number of colonists to speak out against Aboriginal violence.[11] However, his most significant contemporary legacy is probably linguistic.[12] As linguists such as Capell and Worm recognised, the work of Lancelot Threlkeld was a remarkable achievement for his day, the fruits of many years of careful observation and effective collaboration with native informants.[13] Well before it was established that most Aboriginal languages in the south east of Australia were related, Threlkeld was commenting on the similarity of the languages spoken by the people among whom he interacted. After his arrival at Lake Macquarie, he was aware

that the native people around the mission station were connected by ties of kinship, culture and language to those who lived far beyond it in a circle that extend from the Hawkesbury River to Port Stevens north of the modern city of Newcastle.[14] In other words, they formed part of the broadly conceived coastal nation of the *Kuring-gai* which included the *Kuri*-speaking people, a word which Threlkeld knew meant 'man' or 'mankind' and was adopted by Schmidt as his term for the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie language in the language distribution map he published in 1919.[15] As 'Koori', it is now sometimes used as a general term for all Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Threlkeld used it in a sentence which must have been constantly on his lips: *Kuri-ko-ba wiyella bitia* [Man-belonging-to speak thou-me] which might be translated: 'speak to me in the language of the men'.[16] When they chose to speak with him, what did the *Kuri* say?

Before he could answer that question, Threlkeld had to learn the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie language, just as he had already done during his earlier mission in the Society Islands (now French Polynesia). Following the principles of Protestant missions to the heathen, Threlkeld's Instructions from the London Missionary Society (1825) required him to give priority to linguistic and cultural study of his missionary subjects. A knowledge of the language of the Natives, he was advised, was essential and it would help the progress of the mission if he also made himself acquainted with their habits, superstitions and beliefs: 'By a knowledge of these, you will see what the principal difficulties opposing your success are, while an intimate acquaintance with their language will enable you to communicate that information, respecting the Gospel of Jesus, which will be the best adapted to remove the obstacles, and to ensure success'.[17] Threlkeld took

these instructions with the utmost seriousness. With the backing of Archdeacon Broughton and financial support from the Anglican Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), which underwrote the *Australian Grammar* that appeared in 1834,[18] Threlkeld went on to publish another grammar (1850), a spelling book (1836), and translations of parts of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the Gospel of St Mark and the Gospel of St Luke, with a partial lexicon to the latter. A projected translation of the Gospel of St Matthew does not seem to have survived.[19]

Threlkeld saw his linguistic work as both a religious duty and a contribution to science which provided him with some intellectual return despite the failure of the more overly religious aspects of the mission. His linguistic expertise came largely through a long-term productive partnership with a key informant, Biraban or Johnny M 'Gill (c.1800-1846), to whom he acknowledged a considerable debt.[20] Until his return to Sydney in 1841, Threlkeld corresponded from the site of his mission station with other like-minded linguistic investigators who came to include the American linguist, Horatio Hale (1817-1896), Sir George Grey (1812-18989) while the latter was resident in the Cape Colony and Edward Eyre (1815-1891).[21] In 1839 he was delighted to host a visit from Hale at Lake Macquarie.[22] The depth of Threlkeld's research is apparent in the enterprising appendix to his 1839 report, in which he compared lists of words collected from Lake Macquarie, the Manilla River, Swan River and King George's Sound. He provided a tart admonition to those who did not adopt a rigorously scientific attitude in relation to Aboriginal languages or who allowed themselves to be bogged down by the 'trammels of European schools'.[23] At the same time he berated those who ignored the open contempt shown toward the Aboriginal language of the colony: 'which are not highly indicative of

the love of Science in this part of the Globe'.[24] As far as Threlkeld was concerned, science and religion should come together.

Threlkeld's most extended attempt to illustrate the cultural interchange between the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie language and English is presented in his 1834 *Australian Grammar*, the final section of which consists of 26 pages of illustrative sentences and is accompanied by interlineal morpheme-by-morpheme translations, a feature Threlkeld may have adapted from interlineated translations of the Greek New Testament.[25] He noted that the English sentences could only be an imperfect translation since the Aboriginal constructions were 'perfectly distinct, and in many cases not at all similar'.[26]

While most of these sentences were intended to illustrate simple grammatical points, they also contain a remarkable amount of cultural information about the *Kuri* people. It is clear that Threlkeld found it necessary to use English words for many of the items which were imported into the new cultural environment such as hat, spade, musket, clock and store.[27] In other cases, there were Australian equivalents for European items such as *wurubil* (skin cloak) for blanket, *kokiroa* for house, or *pirriwul* which is sometimes translated as 'chief' but also as 'king'.[28] Negotiations between Threlkeld and his informant, Biraban, may possibly be reflected in a series of sentences which concern the relative power of native chiefs, kings and the Governor (a word which is always left untranslated): 'I will let you be king (*Pirriwul*)'; 'Be king (*Pirriwul*) again'; 'Do not let him be king (*Pirriwul*)'.[29] But also, 'I belong to the Governor's place;' 'I am the Governor's'.[30] Other sentences suggest Threlkeld's difficulties with the language as well as the speed with which his mission subjects were acquiring the English they needed to

deal with Europeans. In order to bypass cultural taboos on naming or discussing death, syntax is awry, it is intriguing to find the ready adoption of the English loanword *tetti* (death) in six sentences in place of an Aboriginal equivalent. Threlkeld translates these as follows: 'Alas! alas! I am left to die;' 'Let him die;' 'Kill him. Who shall?;' 'I will permit you to die;' 'I will cause you to die, as by poison;' and finally, *Tetti bungngunnun banúng* [Die force will I-thee], meaning 'I will compel you to die, or, murder you'.[31]

This string of darkly violent sentences hints at another function of Threlkeld's *Australian Grammar*. While originally prepared for the purpose of evangelisation, Threlkeld's linguistic skills were put to other uses by the colonial government. He was often employed to interpret in the Supreme Court, particularly in the late 1830s when there were a series of violent incidents throughout the colony that were referred to by one contemporary observer as 'the black rising'.[32] Threlkeld's mixed roles as missionary, lone scientific expert in Aboriginal languages, and legal interpreter is apparent in the carefully prepared lists of words, phrases and illustrative sentences included in his personal papers. In his tidy hand, he wrote the phrases and sentences for interrogations thatwhich read like the dialogue from court cases and interrogations he had personally attended: 'I think you're a wild fellow; I hear you're a thief; Who told you?; Blackfellow told me; You're a brave fellow; This is a miserable place; I'll fight you tomorrow; I'll spear you this evening; Sit down, I'll not hurt you; I have heard blackfellow going to kill you; Don't you deceive me; I'll put you in the watchhouse; If you break it, I'll kill you; Who gave you the tomahawk?; You hurt me - take care'.[33] The word he used to demonstrate the conjugation of the active verb is 'to strike,' which he then illustrated with 67 illustrative sentences beginning with 'Who was beaten?'; 'Why did that person beat you?' and concluding, like

the final dialogue of an ongoing tragedy, 'Where are those who were struck?'; 'They died of their wounds'.[34]

These sets of sentences provide an insight into a world based on camp life that was rapidly disintegrating, one in which violence, hostile encounters with other blacks and Europeans, and the expectation of injury, deceit and sickness were always present. Yet, it is fair to add, other word lists created and published by Threlkeld suggest a more harmonious natural world of kangaroo, native dog, native bear, flying fox, native cat, snakes and birds dominated the landscape.[35] But this natural world was under critical threat at the time of Threlkeld's linguistic mission to the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie people. What is more, the limited resources that been made available to support Threlkeld's linguistic mission were to prove short-lived. After the NSW government withdrew its funding for the mission, followed by the death or dispersal of all speakers of the language, there was to be no serious attempt by any church or government official to investigate or learn another Aboriginal language until the decision to establish an inland mission in 1832. The mission to the Wiradhurri people at Wellington Valley was also destined to fail, but here again the anguish of the missionaries at the disappointment of their hopes and the struggle to achieve cultural contact with their mission subjects was mitigated to some extent by their linguistic work.

Learning Wiradhurri

Beginning in 1832, the Church Missionary Society posted three missionaries and their wives, William and Anne Watson, Johann Christian Sebastian and Mary Handt, James and Lydia Günther and the unmarried agriculturalist William Porter to the mission station at Wellington Valley, NSW.[36] All were provided with the now traditional instruction to

make what efforts they could to learn the language but only one, Watson, appears to have functioned effectively in the new language. In 1840 the mission was pleased to be able to host the energetic linguist, Horatio Hale, who was travelling with the American Exploring Expedition. [37] Hale considered Watson's proficiency in Wiradhurri to be quite exceptional. Unfortunately, one of the many causes of dispute between the missionaries was determining who should receive credit for the linguistic materials produced in the mission. It is probably impossible to establish just who was responsible for the Wiradhurri words that eventually found their way into the grammar and vocabulary published by Fraser from a manuscript held by Günther's son.[38] While Fraser gave all the credit for this production to Günther, it seems likely that it drew on the combined linguistic efforts of all the missionaries who laboured in this field. Günther seems to have felt his own deficiencies acutely, acknowledging on one occasion: 'although I understand the Grammar tolerably well & have collected the principal words, I have not obtained much fluency in speech, nor can I follow the Natives when conversing among themselves'. He also put the finger on the source of his difficulty: 'I have too little practice to overcome all the difficulties'.[39]

All the missionaries sent to Wellington worked hard to acquire the Wiradhurri language, recording their progress in their journals. A comparison of the achievements of the three senior missionaries, Handt, Watson, and Günther may be instructive here. On arriving in Wellington, Handt frequently noted in his journal that he 'was endeavouring to get some words from the Natives, and to talk with them'.[40] As he was well aware, it was essential to pay close attention to the pronunciation of native speakers and only then attempt to write words down. [41] Handt found that the Wiradhurri were happy to patiently repeat

words until he got them right.[42] But Handt was a slow learner: six months later, in April 1833, he was still complaining that it was a 'great hindrance' not to be able to converse freely with the Natives in their own language.[43] In his report for July to October 1833, when the severe illness of his wife seems to have made it impossible for him to do any other work, Handt could still show some progress by pointing to his activities in the native language, copying out his words and sentences, placing them in order and trying to impress them on his mind.[44] By March 1835, when Handt's relationship with Watson, the senior missionary, was suffering severe strain, he had made considerable progress and moved on to translating both Scripture and teaching materials for the children. He did not flatter himself about the quality of this work, but it served to train him for more challenging work in the future: 'Though these translations can by no means be said to be correct, they are a good exercise in acquiring the language'. [45] Having made the translations (which do not appear among his papers in the CMS archives), Handt then made use of them when he had opportunities to preach to the natives; for example, on 29 July 1835 when he read some of his translation of the Gospel of St Luke to the natives, and made some remarks on it.

William Watson had received the usual training provided by the CMS at the missionary college at Islington, somewhat augmented by some additional medical training.[46] In the case of the languages of Australia, there was only one resource, namely the scanty publications of Lancelot Threlkeld.[47] While the Wellington missionaries were provided with copies of these and Watson tried hard to master them on the course of his voyage to the colony, they were to prove of little use. By coincidence, on his voyage to NSW, Watson shared a cabin with two passengers who came from the Lake Macquarie area,

and who warned him that not only did the natives find it impossible to understand the printed words and phrases, but that the various Aboriginal tribes spoke many distinct languages. Watson attempted to learn what he could from Threlkeld's earliest grammar, declaring, with characteristic over-confidence that 'I have nearly made myself master of it'. But no sooner had he arrived and met Threlkeld than he dismissed the grammars entirely: 'The language I have been learning is not worth a straw. Mr Threlkeld says so himself. It is remarkable he has publish'd the Gospel of St Luke in the Aboriginal language & he cannot converse with the natives in it.'[48] Settled in Wellington at last, Watson worked hard to improve his understanding of the language on the Moravian model — that is 'not to speak on the subject of religion before they could address the natives in the vernacular tongue'— but this seemed impossible. Three years later, in 1835, he was reporting a breakthrough at last: 'Now our way seems opening as we advance in the knowledge of the language we shall have reason to hope for brighter scenes'. [49] By this stage Watson claimed that he had begun preaching in Wiradhurri, sometimes travelling long distances to find themwho? assembled in a camp for this purpose. With the appearance of Threlkeld's Grammar, Watson was pleased to have a model which might serve to create a grammar of Wiradhurri. On 28 January 1835 he wrote in his journal that he had finished copying out nearly ten thousand English words from Johnson's *Pocket Dictionary* and was proceeding to record Aboriginal equivalents as they came to hand.[50] In March 1835 he reported that he had been revising his translation of parts of the Church Service and, although he recognised its imperfections, was delighted that 'some who had attended Divine Service more than the rest immediately understood it'.[51] He reported with some pride in his report for the first

quarter of 1835 that he had translated various sections from the Prayer Book, including the Lord's Prayer, had collated nearly 400 verbs, and had forwarded a short tract which he hoped the Corresponding Committee would arrange to have published. In addition, he had made six or seven dialogues illustrating the view of the natives, including descriptions of the native animals such as the kangaroo, opossum, snake and so on. There was a vocabulary of about 900 words with short prayers and translations of the first four chapters of St Luke's Gospel. As with the work of J.C.S. Handt, none of this material appears to have survived.

When James Günther arrived in Wellington in 1837, it is clear that he was able to build on the linguistic spade-work already accomplished by his missionary predecessors. Günther noted in his journal that within days of his arrival he was asking the children of the mission to pronounce some words in the native language, observing: 'I find the nasal sounds rather a little difficult'.[52] While his facility in the spoken language in unlikely to have ever approached that of Watson, he used every available moment to build a more complete understanding of the language and also began copying words from Watson's vocabulary.[53] A week later he wrote that he 'read a good deal' in Threlkeld's *Grammar*, adding that he thought very little of it: 'He may know a good deal of the Aboriginal tongue but he appears to be no great grammarian nor a correct English writer.[54] It is also to Günther's credit that he immediately recognised the complexity of the language, although it was still common to pretend that the languages of native people were necessarily inferior to those of the civilised world: 'From the little I have seen & heard of the language during the short time of my residence here I conclude that it is by no means very poor. Considering their simple way of living scarcely a grade above the irrational

creation one would naturally expect that their ideas must be very few & comprised in small compass of words but this is far from being the case.'[55]

So Günther knew the difficulty of the task before him, and the limitations of all previous efforts by European grammarians. But he yearned to do better. When preaching to the natives in English, which they scarcely understood, he cried: 'How I wished to be able to preach to them in their own language. May the Lord bless my efforts for that end!'[56] Günther also reported on the advantage enjoyed by Watson, who had sufficient facility to visit the native camps and speak directly to the people assembled there. Günther was also vividly aware that the gulf between the natives and himself was not just one of language, but of culture, and that mere language facility would not change this. He hinted as much in his reports of his careful questioning of the native congregation after hearing one of Mr Watson's native sermons: 'They said that Mr Watson's language was good (correct) but still they could not understand all probably not on account of the language but the matter'.[57] By this stage, Günther was already having serious problems in his relationship with his senior missionary, Watson, whom he accused of devoting too much time to his secular duties as government storekeeper, and too little to his mission duties. Günther compensated by copying Watson's collection of phrases and reading them to the natives so they could 'correct and teach' him.[58] Günther's efforts were apparently paying off by the following year. If his students were in a good humour, he took the opportunity to extract as many fresh words and phrases as possible. By 1838 he was beginning to think he might have established all there was to know, but continued to be surprised by the depth and expressiveness of the language: 'Some time since I had difficulty to get any more fresh words, & thought I have all the language contains. I now find out my

mistake, and see that the language is richer than I imagined, although many essential works, to express Scripture ideas, are evidently lacking.'[59] By November 1839 he wrote that he had spent the day arranging and revising his vocabulary and that this had been his major activity in recent days as they young men had failed to come and visit him. He stressed to himself the significance of this linguistic work: 'I see more & more the necessity of acquiring the Native language, and only regret, I have not more time to devote to it'. [60] Like other missionaries faced with disappointing results from their evangelical work, Günther compensated for the slow progress of the mission by concentrating more and more on his language writing, which, by March 1840, included the preparation of a Grammar. [61] At last, on 1 April, he announced that he had completed his Grammar. He was still working on this in May, trying to compare the Wiradhurri language with that of the Hunter River, and lamenting somewhat that Threlkeld had not adopted a simpler system.[62] Having mastered the grammar to his own satisfaction, he felt confident in moving onto the more arduous work of translation. He completed a version of the Ten Commandments, but found that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis presented extreme difficulties, 'on account of the poverty of the language'. [63]

By this stage, the relationship between Günther and Watson had become so strained that the mission was ready to collapse. It is evidence of the void that had opened up between the two that they do not seem to have shared each other's attempts at translating the same passages scripture and the Anglican Prayer Book. Largely on the basis of Günther's representations, and the scandal and distress caused by Watson's actions in taking children by force, Watson's connection with the CMS was 'dissolved' in a letter he received in July 1840. While Günther was relieved and considered that 'a separation was

a matter of necessity & it is high time it should take place', the departure of the only missionary with real language skill was sufficient to ring the death knell of the Mission.[64]

Despite the labours of all three missionaries, almost none of their collective linguistic efforts appears to have survived, with the exception of the grammar preserved by the Günther family and later published by Fraser. In 1887, when Edward Curr prepared what he planned as a comprehensive comparative encyclopedia of the native people of Australia, Günther seems to have been able to provide 36 Wiradhurri terms from the Mudgee area, and, even in Wellington, H. Keightly could supply only about 100 — and many of these appear to differ from Günther's list.[65] Yet, despite its pretensions, Curr's survey of the Wiradhurri is inferior in almost every respect to Günther's Grammar. In particular, it includes no terms for religious or ceremonial concepts. This blindness to religion is also evident in the work of early ethnographers, notably R.H. Mathews, who published an account of the Wiradhurri language in 1904. While referring disparagingly to Günther's work, published by Fraser, and to the vocabularies collected by Curr, Mathews presented his own study as the first scientific report on the language.[66] Of the vocabulary of 430 words 'collected personally among the Wiradyuri natives on the Lachlan, Macquarie and Murrumbidgee rivers', Mathews does not seem to have found it important to record any words for religious terms or to have understood what he was told. There are some curious conflations; for example, the word for the powerful spirit beings,[67] *buggin,* which was usually translated by the missionaries as 'devil,' is translated by Mathews as 'venereal'. The term Mathews glosses as 'thunder' (*muruburrai*) is also the word for bullroarer; and the usual word for a dance ritual (Mathews: *wuggama*) is

simply translated ‘dance’. Nevertheless, Mathews could supply the terms for penis, testicles, pubic hair, sexual desire, copulation, masturbation, semen, vulva, anus, excrement, urine and (again) venereal (namely: *dhun, gurra, buruwarri, burundunnung, yangiliri, natymiliri, burung, binnan, dhula, gunung, dyungur, middyung*).[68] This was a service to science, for the missionaries did find it difficult to bring themselves to consider any sexual issues, and such words do not appear in any of their wordlists.[69] But, it might well be asked, just what was Mathews doing on his field trips?

Conversations in the Contact Zone

What can the missionary linguistics of the Wellington Valley tell us of the negotiations undertaken by the Wiradhurri people in the contact zone? As with Threlkeld, the sets of illustrative sentences preserved by Günther prove to be a significant source, evocative of the troubles of the mission as well as the trauma of the frontier. They suggest the intimacy of the camp and the awkward client/ master relationship of native and missionary — a relationship in which the natives at Wellington often had the upper hand. The mission was failing; the missionaries had a poor grasp of the language; the catastrophic impact of European colonisation was creating a backwash of local violence, epidemic disease and cultural collapse. There are, to begin with, sentences which show the faltering attempts by the missionaries to acquire the Wiradhurri language. ‘What do you say? Speak slowly; Speak plainly (or distinctly)!; Do you understand Wiradhurri?; and, apologetically, ‘*Guayodu wirai wammambu yalgirri* — By-and-by I shall no more speak incorrectly’. [70]

Even more evocative of the challenges of the frontier are those sentences which reflect the constant concern of the missionaries at the unpredictable comings and goings of the

natives. This eventually led Watson to more and more drastic actions, including the kidnapping of children and young women by force, with the assistance of the local police.[71] The missionaries engaged in a perpetual search for their missionary subjects: the first six sentences in the Günther collection concern the problem of tracking down the natives and trying to persuade them to come and listen to the missionaries. In fact, the missionaries were nearly always obliged to go down to the camp, or travel through the bush, if they were to have any contact with the Wiradhurri at all. They might ask: 'Do you know where the natives are gone?; When will the men return?; Why don't you come when I tell you?'; and they would be told: 'All the men went to the hills; All the natives are running about on the mountains the whole day'. Eventually they would be reassured: 'Now the natives are coming back from the mountains; All the men are returned from the bush'. 'Why did you not come sooner?' would come the missionary's ineffectual reproof.[72] What is most evident through both the journals and the sentences is the extent to which the missionaries were obliged to wait on the convenience of the natives.

It is not hard to come to the conclusion that the natives, although their world was shattering around them, had the upper hand in this relationship, if on no other front. We hear the voice of the missionaries trying to secure their confidence, negotiate the peace and listen: 'Tell me all about it; Where is your country?; I tell you to be quiet; I like that song; I want to be a comrade'.[73] Whether friendship or even comradeship was possible between missionaries and the Wiradhurri is difficult to say, but Günther at least does appear to have attempted to devise sentences which allowed him to pose questions of this kind. The missionaries attempted to win the friendship and interest of the natives — but

they were seldom able to do so without providing food and, even more attractive, tobacco: 'He is very fond of smoking; Give me tobacco; I have no tobacco', with the ever present threat: 'If you do not give me meat, I shall go away'.[74]

On some questions, however, there was no rebuff, and the persistence of the missionaries may often have been a source of irritation and insult to the Wiradhurri. On almost no other topic was there such a difference between the natives and the missionaries as on the subject of death. The impact of European disease on the Wiradhurri was truly terrible, leading to their almost total destruction in the time from the arrival of William Watson in 1832 to the end of the mission in about 1840. As Handt noted in his journal, the natives had a great horror of death and all things associated with it.[75] The missionaries were also alert to the opening for their religious messages that the approach of death provided, and hastened to many a death bed in the hope of observing a conversion. On this they were frequently disappointed, asking: '*Minyangan main ingel*? (How many natives are ill?)', being reassured at some times: '*Ngunba-ngunbai main balluna* (very few natives are dying);' and devastated at others: '*Wiraigual main ngiġaġarrigirri* (there will soon be no more blacks); '*Gaddandi ballune biambul* (all my friends are dead).'[76]

The missionaries were also often involved when the police sought out natives on serious criminal charges including murder.[77] The sentences tell of the missionaries' attempt to intervene in violent encounters between European and native, and between the Wiradhurri and their traditional enemies: '*Guin ngurongga mallang dunni* (He was to spear him that night). '*Ngolong burrabadde* (He sunk the hatchet in his face).[78] Confronted by such violence, evangelisation might be assumed to have taken a subsidiary place, but conversations on spiritual matters appear to have continued unabated: 'In

death, good souls will ascend to heaven,' Günther might say, or 'Our souls will live, when we are dead;' and 'God will take good souls to heaven;'[79] There were more challenging questions too: '*Yamandu dullubandurai* (Have you got a soul?)'; Yamandu winnangganna dagundu ballungidyala (or yandundu ballungiri) dullubanag yannagiri? (Do you know where your souls are going to when you die?) And finally, there were assurances of life after death, a return to heaven, to the Father and an eternity of bliss — concepts which were full of hope and promise for the white missionaries, but contrasted sharply with Wirradhuri ideas of an eternal present in which ancestral beings shared a kind of eternity but toin? which ordinary men and women did not participate: '*Yandulli ballungirri ngannaiawalla, ngali wibiagirri dururdurur-buolin*. (When we die, we shall always live above)'; '*Yandundu walluin ngingirri, Godda ngéanni yannbigirri yallabal wibigiagirri dururdururbuolin*. (If we are good, we shall go to God and always live with him)'; '*Yandunu dullubang irimbaġgingirri ngindu wari babbindyanu yannagirri, yandundu ballungirri*. (If your soul is holy, you will go to your Father when you die)'.[80]

Conclusion

These days, many of the Wiradhurri people who continue to make their home in and around the central New South Wales town of Wellington identify themselves as Christians for formal purposes such as the census return. Since we know that the first missions to the Wiradhurri people did not lead to any official converts, where have these Christians come from? After the Church Missionary Society withdrew its support for the Wellington Valley mission, the missionary William Watson and his wife Anne remained in the area and continued to minister to the local European and Aboriginal communities. Some of Wellington's Indigenous Christians may be descendants of the Wirradhurri

mission children who remained associated with the Watsons and their post-mission farming enterprise. Some may remember the work of the later mission enterprise of the United Aborigines Mission (UAM), which was active there until the 1960s. As Peter Read has described, the history of the Wiradhurri people of New South Wales has involved such repeated dislocation that we can only speculate about how the modern-day community at Wellington acquired or discarded their habit of affiliation with institutional Christianity. [81] Although there is a fine dedicatory stained glass window to the missionaries in the Anglican church of St. John the Evangelist in the town of Wellington, the overall impression was that there was little other than this local memorial to connect them with the Anglican communion. Even the exact location of the old missionary establishment had been forgotten. This adds a particular poignancy to historical investigation of what may prove to be the Wellington missionaries' most enduring legacy – their linguistic records of the Wiradhurri language and the evidence they provide for an interpretation of the pattern of religious change in the contact zone.

This article has argued that cultural exchanges on the Australian frontier have been recorded to some extent in a significant, but almost entirely neglected source, missionary linguistics. The grammars and word lists of Threlkeld, Watson, Handt and Günther have attracted the attention of few scholars other than students of linguistics. While their value as scientific records of the Hunter River and Lake Macquairie and Wiradhurri languages might be limited, they also preserves something of great value – the words used by Europeans in some of the first and, unfortunately also the last, conversations in these languages with tribal people in the south-eastern frontier. It is not surprising that these conversations should have focussed so strongly on death, violence, and disruption. Both

Threkeld and Günther were obliged to employ their linguistic resources in court where they needed words to translate the experience of crime and punishment. While all the missionaries discussed in this article felt conscious of their limited success to learn the language of their missionary subjects, it can also be argued that they recorded more of the experience of the frontier and its struggles than they may have been aware. This is an important legacy.

1 **Notes**

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[1] All citations from the records of the Wellington Valley missionaries taken from the online edition of the originals, now in the CMS Archives, University of Birmingham Library, Hilary M. Carey and David A. Roberts, eds. *The Wellington Valley Project. Letters and Journals relating to the Church Missionary Society Mission to Wellington Valley, NSW, 1830 - 45. A Critical Electronic Edition*. 2002. http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/amrhd/wvp/. For the context of the CMS mission and review of previous studies of Wiradhurri language, culture and mission history, see Hilary M. Carey, and David Roberts, 'Smallpox and the Baiame Waganna of Wellington Valley, New South Wales, 1829-1840: The Earliest Nativist Movement in Aboriginal Australia', *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 821-869.

[2] For the failure of the Wellington Valley mission, see Jean Woolmington, 'Writing on the Sand: The First Missions to Aborigines in Eastern Australia', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, edited by T. Swain and D.B. Rose (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988), 77-92. For the theme of mission failure, see Hilary M. Carey, ''Attempts and Attempts': Responses to Failure in Pre- and Early Victorian Missions to the Australian Aborigines', in *Mapping the Landscape: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Christianity. Festschrift in Honour of Professor Ian Breward*, ed. Susan Emilsen and William W. Emilsen (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 45-61.

[3] For the earliest word lists, see the appendix to Philip Parker King, *Narrative of a Survey of the inter-tropical and Western Coasts of Australia, performed between the years 1818 and 1822*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1826).

[4] Edward M. Curr, *The Australian Race: Its Origin, Languages, Customs, Place of landing in Australia, and the routes by which it spread itself over that continent*, 4 vols.(Melbourne & London: John Farnes & Trubner, 1886-1887).

[5] HRLM sentences from Lancelot Threlkeld, *Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales [1826]* (Sydney, 1827), repr. in John Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892), Appendix G, 136, 139: *Min-na-ring unne* [What this] m. what is this?; *Minnaring unnoa* [What that] m. what is that?; *Wonta berung be* [Where from thou] m. where hast thou come from?.

[6] Wiradhurri sentences by James Günther in Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language* Part IV (D) Grammar and Vocabulary of the Wiradharil Dialect in New South Wales, 112, 113, 116: *Widyundu yuin ngolong*? (What is your name?); *Ngandunu nginyal bunmé* (Who has made you?); *Yamandu winnanganna dagundu*

ballungidyala? (do you know where your souls are going to when you die?); *Yamandu dullubandurai* (have you got a soul?)

[7] Peterson, 'Translating the Word: Dialogism and Debate in Two Gikuyu Dictionaries', *Journal of Religious History* 23.1 (1999): 31-50; Otto Zwartjes and Even Hovdhaugen, *Missionary linguistics: selected papers from the First International Conference on Missionary Linguistics, Oslo, 13-16 March 2003* (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2004); Rachael Gilmour, *Grammars of Colonialism: Representing Languages in Colonial South Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

[8] Joseph Errington, 'Colonial Linguistics', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 19-39; Paul Stuart Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995).

[9] Sometimes complicated by imperial rivalries, as for example in Togo where there was a major struggle when German administrators sought to assert the dominance of German over English and Ewe languages as the sole language of instruction in mission schools. Benjamin Nicholas Lawrance, 'Most Obedient Servants: The Politics of Language in German Colonial Togo', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 40.3 (2000): 489-524.

[10] For a full assessment of early linguistics in Australia, see now William McGregor, ed. *Aboriginal languages: Studies in the History of AustralianLlinguistics* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2008); Hilary M. Carey, 'Lancelot Threlkeld and Missionary Linguistics in Australia to 1850', in *Missionary Linguistics*, edited by Otto Zwartjes and Even Hovdhaugen, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 253-75.

[11] Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Anna Johnston, 'A blister on the imperial antipodes: Lancelot Edward Threlkeld in Polynesia and Australia', in *Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* ed. David Lambert and Alan Lester, 58-87 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 60-69.

[12] For linguistic assessments, see S.A. Wurm, *Languages of Australia and Tasmania* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 14; Arthur Capell, 'Language in Aboriginal Australia', in *Aboriginal Man in Australia. Essays in Honour of Emeritus Professor A.P. Elkin*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1965), 101-2; Niel Gunson, ed., *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld*, 2 vols. (Canberra, ACT, 1974), 1-2. For a modern grammar drawn largely from Threlkeld's

publications, see Amanda Lissarrague, *A Salvage Grammar and Wordlist of the Language from the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie* (Nambucca Heads, NSW: Muurrbay Language and Culture Centre, 2006).

[13] Threkeld did not give a name to the HRLM language. His earliest notes on its orthography, dated September 1825, refer to 'a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales'. [Sir Thomas Brisbane Papers (1812-37), Mitchell Library Microfilm FM4/1626]. His two published accounts were entitled: *Specimens of a dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales* (Sydney, 1827) and *An Australian Grammar* (Sydney: Stephens and Stokes, 1834). The name 'Awabakal' was invented by John Fraser for his edition of Threlkeld's linguistic writing. See Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 50, where he refers to 'Mr Threlkeld's acquisitions in the dialect which I have called Awabakal, from Awaba, the native name for Lake Macquarie'.

[14] Cited by Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences*, 3.

[15] Wilhelm Schmidt, *Die gliederung Australischen sprachen: geographische, bibliographische, linguistische grundzüge der erforschung der Australischen sprachen* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag, 1919).

[16] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, Part I, 80.

[17] Threlkeld Papers, Mitchell Library MSS A382, p. 19. [Hereafter Threlkeld Papers] This is a printed version of his instructions which Threlkeld probably circulated himself.

[18] L. E. Threlkeld, *An Australian Grammar: comprehending the Principles and Natural Rules of the Language as Spoken by the Aborigines in the Vicinity of Hunter's River, Lake Macquarie, etc., New South Wales* (Sydney: Stephens and Stokes 'Herald Office' for SPCK, 1834).

[19] For a list of Threlkeld's linguistic work, 'in the dialect which I have called the 'Awabakal' see Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, xv: '1827 'Specimens of the Aboriginal Language'; printed then 1829. First draft of the Translation of the Gospel of St. Luke; 1823. Translation of Prayers for Morning and Evening Service from the Ritual of the Church of England; these were selected by Archdeacon Broughton; 1834. 'The Australian Grammar' published. Mr Threlkeld's memoranda show that at the beginning of this year the following subjects were occupying his attention: '1. Specimens of the Language; 2. The Australian Grammar; 3. The Gospel of St. Luke, under revisal; 4. The Gospel of St. Mark, in preparation. The first rough translation was completed in 1837; 5. The Gospel of St Matthew, just commenced; 6. The instruction of two native youths in writing and reading their own language; 7. Reading lessons selected

from the Old Testament; 8. An Australian Spelling Book; 1836. 'The Spelling Book' printed; 1850. 'The Key to the Aboriginal Language' published; 1859. At the time of his death he was engaged in completing the translation of the four Gospels; and was proceedings with the 'Lexicon to the Gospel by St. Luke''.

[20] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 88.

[21] Threlkeld to Sir George Grey, 12 April 1859, thanking him for the notice he had given to 'my attempts at recording for posterity the languages of the Aborigines'. Grey also informed Threlkeld that some of his work had been published in the US by Horatio Hale. Taking not the slightest offence at this, Threlkeld simply noted that Hale had been with him at Lake Macquarie and that he had given him: 'all the information in my power', in Threlkeld Papers, p. 109.

[22] Threlkeld, *Annual Report of the Mission to the Aborigines for 1839*, in Threlkeld Papers, pp. 157-159. For Hale's work, see Michael Mackert, 'Horatio Hale and the Great U.S. Exploring Expedition', *Anthropological Linguistics* 36.1 (1994): 1-26.

[23] Threlkeld, *Annual Report for 1839*, in Threlkeld Papers, p. 61.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Threlkeld, *Australian Grammar*, 105-131; Reprinted by Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 63-82. Page references in parentheses which follow refer to Threlkeld's 1834 edition.

[26] Threlkeld, *Australian Grammar*, 105.

[27] Thelkeld, *Australian Grammar*, hat and spade (125), musket (108, 113), clock (127, 128), store (113).

[28] Thelkeld, *Australian Grammar*, house (110), *pirriwillo* (106: 'king'); (107: 'chief')

[29] Threlkeld, *Australian Grammar*, 115.

[30] Threlkeld, *Australian Grammar*, 115.

[31] Threlkeld, *Australian Grammar*, 126.

[32] Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences*, 27.

[33] Thelkeld Papers, pp. 157-159.

[34] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 72-75. Each sentence is presented in the HRLM language with interlineal phoneme by phoneme translation, followed by a less literal translation.

[35] Threlkeld, *Australian Language*, 85 – 93, lists common nouns including many names for plants, animals, hunting and fishing implements as well as those for religious and ceremonial matters.

[36] For more complete biographical information, see the Wellington Valley Project, http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/amrhd/wvp/.

[37] Gunther Journal, 26 Jan. 1840.

[38] Günther, James. 'Grammar and Vocabulary of the Aboriginal Dialect Called the Wirradhuri', in Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language,* Appendix D, 56-120.

[39] Günther Journal, 1 April 1840.

[40] Handt Journal, 22 Oct. 1832.

[41] Handt Journal., 24 Oct. 1832.

[42] Handt Journal, 30 Oct. 1832.

[43] Handt Journal., 18 April 1833.

[44] Handt Journal July - October 1833

[45] Handt Journal 24 March 1835.

[46] CMS, Coates to Sydney Corresponding Committee.

[47] Lancelot Threlkeld, *Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales*. First printed in 1826, republished in Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, Appendix G, 131-48. Threlkeld himself recognised the limitations of this tract which he completed after only eighteen months acquaintance with the language and without a systematic representation of the sounds.

[48] In fact the Gospel of St Luke was not published until 1892.

[49] Watson to Jowitt, 21 May 1835, Watson Correspondence.

[50] Watson Journal, 28 Jan. 1835.

[51] Watson Journal, 15 March 1835.

[52] Günther Journal, 10 August 1837.

[53] Günther Journal, 16 August 1837, and 19 August 1837

[54] Günther Journal, 23 August 1837; 24 August 1837

[55] Günther Journal, 16 August 1837.

[56] Günther Journal, 27 August 1837.

[57] Günther Journal, 3 Sept. 1837.

[58] Günther Journal, 2, 3, 12 October 1837

[59] Günther Journal, 8 Jan. 1840.

[60] Günther Journal, 15 Nov. 1839.

[61] Günther Journal, 28 March 1840.

[62] Günther Journal, 30 May 1840.

[63] Günther Journal, 8 August 1840.

[64] Günther Journal, 27 July 1840.

[65] Edward M. Curr, *The Australian Race*, 4 vols (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1887), vol. 3, 364 - 401.

[66] R.H. Mathews, 'The Wiradjuri and Other Languages of New South Wales', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 34 (1904): 284-305.

[67] For the extensive powers of the spirit beings called Bugin, who were believed to walk invisibly and visit sleepers to rob them of their fat, see A. H. Howitt, *Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 373-74. See also Watson's reported conversation with Kabarrin, Watson Journal, 22 Feb. 1835: 'I have always thought by Baggin the Native meant the evil Spirit, but Kabarrin told me to day that every man has a Baggin and a Tullubang (soul). I enquired, Do you see Baggin and Tullubang? Yes. Do they both reside in man while he lives? Yes. If they are inside the body how do the Natives see them they cannot see the heart which is in the body? O doctors can see them them, doctors do not tell lies. He would say no more on the subject'.

[68] Mathews, 'Wiradjuri', 303. Günther's wordlist gives *baibadi* and *baien* as the Wiradjuri terms for semen and venereal, in Fraser, ed. *Australian Language*, 70.

[69] Note, for example, in Günther's Journal, 9 Jan. 1840: 'I employed a few others, for a time, by asking them many things in the language, and attained a few fresh words. I was forcibly struck at this occasion, how many of their words are polluted by obscene ideas annexed to them, betraying the shocking sensuality, and filthy practises of these poor savages. I was fully confirmed in my opinion, that the women are mostly treated as prostitutes it seems there is never a female kept sacred to her husband. At the same time I must own, that the women are more degraded & shameless than the men; The latter hesitate far more than the former, at exposing their vile practices'. Sexually explicit play and socialisation is described among the memory culture of the Narrinyeri, see Berndt and Berndt, *A World That Was*, 151-62.

[70] Sentences selected from Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 110-116.

[71] Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1988).

[72] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 110-112.

[73] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 110-112.

[74] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 111-112.

[75] Handt Journal, 14 Oct. 1835. [The natives] are justified with a great fear of death; and yet it is impossible to speak to them about religion, even with regard to the joys of heaven, without teaching the point of death. May the Lord deliver them from this slavish fear, and from him who has the power of death.

[76] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 112-113.

[77] Handt Journal, 1 Dec. 1835.

[78] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 110.

[79] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 111, 112, 114.

[80] Fraser, ed. *An Australian Language*, 112, 118.

[81] Read, *A Hundred Years War.*