

The Enigmatic German: The Life and Work of Erhard Eylmann, an Ethnographer in Australia

Peter Monteath

College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences,
Flinders University

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Paul Erhard Andreas Eylmann (1860-1926) remains one of the more obscure and enigmatic German ethnographers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many of his contemporaries, he had neither formal training nor a formal position as an ethnographer when he carried out his work in Australia, yet over three separate visits he collected a large quantity of data and substantially expanded German knowledge of the continent. His major work, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien* (The Natives of the Colony of South Australia), published in 1908, is his most important contribution to the history of anthropology. [1] The value of Eylmann's legacy lies in the extent of his travels in Australia and of the knowledge he acquired in the process, even if his work remains largely unknown in the country to which he devoted a significant portion of his life and work.

Biography

A good part of what is known of Eylmann's life is attributable to the Übersee-Museum (Overseas Museum, from 1935-1945 the Deutsches Kolonial- und Übersee-Museum) in Bremen, not far from where he lived out the last years of his life. Eylmann had no official connection to the museum, but after his death in 1926, his journals and the collection of

artefacts and other items he had assembled on his Australian travels passed into the museum's possession. In 1938 it published the first biographical work on Eylmann, albeit with a number of gaps. [2] Later scholars have been able to fill in some of those gaps, without ever being able to remove entirely a sense of enigma attached to Eylmann. [3]

The 1938 essay by Otto Bunzendahl established that Eylmann was born on Krautsand, an island in the Elbe. [4] The Eylmanns were wealthy landowners who could trace their presence on the island back to 1650. Erhard Eylmann was born on 3 September 1860, the second of ten children. Initially he was educated at home, but in 1874 he began attending school in nearby Stade, then in Otterndorf and finally in Osnabrück. Eylmann showed no inclination to work on the family farm, preferring to enrol at the university in Leipzig, where his lifelong devotion to scientific enquiry began in earnest. In Leipzig he studied botany, physics, chemistry and comparative anatomy, while also attending lectures on the history of philosophy and German grammar. By the summer of 1884 he had enrolled at the University of Freiburg, having decided to take a degree in medicine. This entailed further study of the natural sciences, pursuing a particular interest in zoology. So devoted was he to the discipline, that in 1886 he successfully completed a doctorate with a thesis on European daphnids. [5] Then he switched university again, this time to Würzburg, while continuing his studies in medicine. On the completion of a second dissertation he graduated and became a qualified doctor of medicine. [6]

In 1891 Eylmann married Bertha Maria Ruh, whom he had met during his studies in Freiburg. It is likely that it was his wife's fragile health that persuaded the couple to move shortly thereafter to Cairo, where the climate might have helped Bertha's lung condition. Nonetheless, she died in 1894, and Eylmann returned to Germany. It has been speculated that Eylmann's helplessness when confronted with his wife's fatal illness persuaded him never to practise medicine again. In any case, back in Germany he now made his way to Berlin to devote himself to the study of geography, geology and, crucially, ethnology. [7]

At this time, Berlin was the epicentre of German anthropology. It had established a foothold in the city's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. Berlin was also the home of the Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Pre-History), which attracted a wide membership outside academe as well as within it. There is no evidence that Eylmann formally joined the society, though he may well have attended public lectures. [8] Moreover, Berlin possessed an anthropological museum – the Museum für Völkerkunde. Artefacts collected by German and other anthropologists from all over the world were gathered there.

German anthropology at that time divided itself into two main streams. Physical anthropology, in German labelled *Anthropologie*, was championed above all by the dynamic and influential figure of Rudolf Virchow in Berlin. Like Virchow, many of the practitioners of *Anthropologie* came from backgrounds in the medical or biological sciences. Their primary concern was with the physical and biological dimensions of the study of human beings. At the same time, in this period in which a united Germany was pursuing colonial ambitions,

there was great interest in *Völkerkunde*, a branch of anthropological study which might be translated as ethnology. The interests of German *Völkerkunde* stretched beyond the physical to social and cultural anthropology, especially in relation to non-European peoples. Despite his medical training, and although he maintained an interest in physical anthropology, Erhard Eylmann resolved to become above all a practitioner of *Völkerkunde*.

Eylmann pursued his ethnographic fieldwork in the period 1896 to 1913. In that time he made three field-trips to Australia and published most of his work. It is possible that Eylmann planned further visits to Australia to carry out more fieldwork, but the outbreak of war intervened. Aged 54 in 1914, Eylmann was too old to be considered for an active role in the war, but he offered his medical services, albeit without identifying himself as a fully qualified doctor but rather as the ‘writer Dr. Erhard Eylmann’. Germany’s economic woes in the aftermath of the war hit Eylmann hard, the inflation destroying the value of his savings and forcing him to move to very modest accommodation in the small town of Farge on the Lower Weser. [9] After the death of his second wife in 1921 – Eylmann had remarried in 1901, this time to a woman from his native Krautsand – Eylmann lived a hermit-like existence, and despite taking on humble factory work to help make ends meet, he lived in unrelieved penury until his death on 22 December 1926. [10]

Eylmann in Australia

It is not certain precisely when or why Eylmann settled on Australia, and specifically the colony of South Australia, as the place to carry out his ethnographic studies. The knowledge that South Australia had a significant German-speaking population might have entered his calculations. It is also likely that Eylmann was influenced by a strand of thinking in late nineteenth century ethnography which identified Australia as worthy of the discipline’s attention because of the presence there of so-called *Naturvölker*. Since the time of Herder, German ethnography had conventionally distinguished between *Kulturvölker*, that is, ‘peoples of culture’, and so-called *Naturvölker*, literally ‘peoples of nature’. The latter were understood to be nearer to nature and still at the earliest stages of human development. Sometimes they were deemed to be without culture, but the use of the term *Naturvölker* varied in complex ways. It was a distinction which Eylmann, like many of his German contemporaries, embraced, while at the same time Eylmann took the view that such terms represented the ends of a spectrum rather than exclusive categories. Indeed, in his book he notes, ‘Strictly speaking we can speak only of *Kultur- und Halbkulturvölker*; in reality there are no pure *Naturvölker*.’ [11] In any case, with the spread of European power, it was becoming difficult by the end of the nineteenth century to find indigenous populations anywhere in the world who had not experienced sustained contact with Europeans, but parts of Australia were considered exceptional. Central Australia appeared particularly promising, because the level of contact between indigenous populations and Europeans was still perceived as minimal. If Eylmann was drawn by the prospect of studying people in their ‘natural’ state, he was not alone. Some of the fruits of this turn-of-the-century European fascination with Australia are to be found in the works of such seminal figures as Bronislaw

Malinowski, Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss. [12]

Whatever his reasoning and motivation, in 1896 Erhard Eylmann undertook his first expedition to Australia, in which he was the sole participant and for which he himself provided the funds. [13] The colony of South Australia, which at that time included the Northern Territory and thereby comprised almost a third of the Australian continent, stretched from Adelaide, the colony's capital in the south, north to Palmerston (today's Darwin), a colonial outpost on the north coast of Australia. [14]

Eylmann arrived in Adelaide in early February 1896 and set about gathering information on the colony. In early March he commenced his journey, initially by train to Oodnadatta, where he purchased two horses, and from then further north on horseback. As he put it, 'I travelled like a regular bushman. I used one horse for riding, and the other horse carried my precious possessions.' [15] Generally he followed the main track along the Overland Telegraph Line, which connected Adelaide with Palmerston, and thereafter to the rest of the world. Eylmann, however, was in no hurry. To satisfy his curiosity, and to explore relatively unknown territory, he made numerous excursions to the east and the west of the line.

Eylmann's primary interest was to observe and glean information about indigenous Australians, but he also evinced a lively interest in the disciplines of biology, zoology and geology. His accommodation was either under the open sky or, on numerous occasions and for lengthy periods, with hosts who welcomed him into their homes. Thus on the way north he spent some months at Stirling Station, some twenty kilometres south of Barrow Creek; he also stayed for a protracted period as a guest of German missionaries at the Lutheran Mission Station at Hermannsburg. Not until the middle of 1897 did he reach the railhead at Pine Creek south of Palmerston, where he remained for several weeks. He then made another of his detours from the main track to visit another mission station, in this instance run by Irish and Austrian Jesuits on the Daly River. Not until the end of August 1897 did he finally reach Palmerston. [16]

Eylmann's return journey to Adelaide saw him spend extended periods at Rum Jungle and once again at Hermannsburg, which he reached in the first week of July 1898. Not until the middle of October 1898 did he leave his fellow Germans, visiting the Arltunga goldfields in the MacDonnell Ranges before rejoining the Overland Telegraph Line at Alice Springs and following it south, still on horseback, to Oodnadatta, where he sold his horses and purchased a train ticket to complete his journey. He arrived back in Adelaide in late December 1898. [17]

After a month he resolved to undertake a further expedition, this time on foot, and in a south-easterly direction to the colony of Victoria. Over a period of five weeks he walked some 800 kilometres, following the Coorong, reaching Cape Otway and then returning to Adelaide on an inland route which took him through Border Town. After two weeks in Adelaide he boarded a steamer for his homeland. [18]

With all this his Australian travels were still not over. A year later, in June of 1900, he was

back in South Australia. He undertook two relatively brief expeditions, both of them to mission stations. The first, of just eight days, was to the Congregationalist mission station at Point Macleay (now Raukkan), on Lake Alexandrina south-east of Adelaide. There followed a longer expedition of several weeks to the Lutheran mission station known as Bethesda at Killalpaninna on Cooper's Creek several hundred kilometres north of Adelaide. To reach it he once more caught a train, disembarking at Hergott Springs and then making a 150 kilometre trek east. He was back in Adelaide by August and then returned once more to Germany. [19]

A third and final visit, made after the publication of his *magnum opus*, occurred in 1912/1913. Very little is known about it, except that his travels were confined to the continent's south-east, comprising a distance of some 1200 kilometres covered on foot and by train, as well as a distance of some 1500 kilometres by steamer on the Murray River. His scholarly interests appear to have moved beyond ethnography; in any case the publications which eventuated from this period are devoted to ornithology and sociology. [20]

Eylmann's Ethnographic Networks

Erhard Eylmann operated in an age when much ethnographic activity, including his own, was the work of enthusiastic amateurs. Although he travelled and worked almost entirely alone, Eylmann did create connections and exchanged some data with other ethnographers. His most important connections were with missionaries, especially with German missionaries, who pursued mission activities among Indigenous populations in southern, central and northern Australia.

Prior to and during his visit to Cooper's Creek, Eylmann received substantial help from the missionary Johannes Reuther, including access to Reuther's own ethnographic collection. [21] Similarly, Eylmann received assistance from the missionaries Nicol Wettengel and Otto Siebert and the station administrator Hermann Vogelsang. [22] He had much more sustained contact with the Hermannsburg Mission Station on the Finke River in Central Australia. Through that Lutheran mission station, run by Carl Strehlow, Eylmann was able to make detailed observations of the local population living at and in the vicinity of the station. It seems, however, that Eylmann's relationship with Strehlow was strained, and he wrote critically of Strehlow's proselytising endeavours. [23]

In Central Australia Eylmann also made contact with Francis Gillen, who at that time was working collaboratively with the Melbourne-based biologist-cum-anthropologist Baldwin Spencer. Gillen accommodated the visiting German twice, shared information with him, guided him to an Indigenous community near Alice Springs and later met with Eylmann in Adelaide. [24] After his initial contact with Eylmann, Gillen wrote to Spencer: 'We have had a visit from a German scientist MD and PhD, a geologist etc., he has gone on to Barrow Creek and will stay a week or two with me on his return. He was greatly interested in my Anthro photos and never tired of looking at them. ... A most interesting man this German, unmistakably a Gentleman, he has been a great deal in Egypt and the Soudan and is altogether an Emir Pasha [25] like individual.' [26] Such was Eylmann's gratitude for the

support provided him by Gillen that he offered in return to make some sketches for Gillen, one of which was published in Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. [27]

Eylmann's Contribution to Ethnography

Eylmann's major work, his 1908 book *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, is unusual in that it is both an ethnographic study and an account of the author's travels through Australia. With this almost encyclopaedic publication, Eylmann sought to record the very wide range of indigenous groups in the colony of South Australia, from the lower south-east to the very far north around Palmerston. He intended to describe and document as many aspects of their lives as he was able, so as to establish a comprehensive ethnographic record. For this reason his book explores such diverse topics as physiology, language, religion, burial practices, tools, weaponry, ornamentation, medicine and art. It supplements those detailed written observations, stretching over 494 pages, with reproductions of his own sketches and a small number of photographs.

The forms and the sources of the empirical base which Eylmann collected are as diverse as the topics he explored. While his capacity to carry artefacts with him was limited, he nonetheless assembled a rich range of items, from tools, utensils and artworks to geological samples. While all three of his expeditions in Australia were single-person expeditions, he solicited ethnographic data from the Europeans with whom he stayed for varying periods of time and from those whose expert knowledge he deliberately sought out. Although he seldom provides details of the names and particular circumstances of indigenous people, it is apparent that some travelled with him for varying lengths of time or were residing in locations where Eylmann himself stayed, and that he included data solicited from them among his body of evidence.

Although his book is not richly referenced, there is sufficient detail to make the reader aware of the writings Eylmann absorbed before, during and after his fieldwork. These include works in German and English by such figures as Robert Brough Smith, Francis Gillen, Baldwin Spencer, Charles Wilhelmi, Johannes Ranke, Fritz Gräbner, George Taplin, F E H W Krichauff, Karl Emil Jung, Max Nordau, Paul Foelsche and Alfred Howitt.

Eylmann's travels over thousands of kilometres brought him into contact with many different populations, from the Ngarrindjeri in areas of South Australia, through the Diyari, Arrernte and Luritja in Central Australia to the Larrakia in the vicinity of Palmerston. While recording the distinctive characteristics of these populations, Eylmann is also inclined at times to consider them collectively, applying such labels as 'der Australier' (the Australian), 'die australische Rasse' (the Australian race), or 'unser Südaustralier' (our South Australian). [28]

As an ethnographer Eylmann prioritised an empirical approach, that is, he devoted himself primarily to the collection of ethnographic data. As was typical of his contemporaries in Berlin such as Adolf Bastian and Felix von Luschan, Eylmann was less concerned with

matters of theory. Like most German ethnographers of his time, he did not subscribe to the theory of evolution. In explaining the features of the Australians he observed, his inclination was to regard them as representatives of a particular stage of cultural development. In Eylmann's interpretation, Australians were located on a 'niedrige Kulturstufe' (low stage of cultural development) [29]; they lagged behind the so-called *Kulturvölker*. He suggests, however, that this lack of cultural development was not a manifestation of biological or intellectual inferiority :

The intellectual capacity of the Australian is far more significant than one is generally inclined to assume, and I believe that I am guilty of no exaggeration when I claim that in the extent of his powers of reason he distinguishes himself less from the European than he does in his physical appearance. The low stage of cultural development at which he finds himself, it is true, is at odds with this claim. However, if he had not been almost entirely isolated from foreign peoples over long periods, then he would not still find himself today in the Stone Age. Moreover, we must not forget that nature in his homeland has tended to inhibit his development to a higher form of culture rather than advance it. [30]

While Eylmann understood himself to be above all an empiricist, his work nonetheless betrays many of the well-established assumptions and prejudices of his time. While not without sympathy for the misfortunes and hardships suffered by indigenous Australians, Eylmann readily repeated common stereotypes. He shared the assumption, for example, that as the result of contact with Europeans, indigenous Australians were destined to become extinct. He predicts the *Rassentod* (death of the race) of indigenous Australians, appealing to what he identified as a universal law: 'If a people [Volk] which finds itself at a very low stage of development comes into close contact with Whites, then in many cases a sudden or gradual extinction occurs.' [31] Taking the particular example of the Ngarrindjeri people, he anticipated that within a few decades no more would still be alive. [32] Like many European ethnographers at the time, he saw value in studying a population before contact with Europeans brought fundamental changes. He was thus a practitioner of a form of 'salvage anthropology', as he sought to create and preserve detailed records before the populations he had chosen to study disappeared.

Although he was concerned to make as comprehensive as possible an ethnographic record of each population he studied, he showed little interest in understanding his subjects in the sense of attempting to enter into their mental or intellectual world. In his view, the attainment of intersubjective understanding was beyond the remit of the ethnographer. He did not attempt to learn languages or acquire a deeper understanding of their myths and legends. In that regard, his approach was quite different from that adopted by his German missionary contemporaries, who saw the acquisition of an understanding of the mental world of their subjects – above all through learning their languages – as a first and necessary step to preparing them for conversion to Christianity. Eylmann was deeply sceptical of the missionaries' task and posed the rhetorical question, 'Can a human being such as the Australian, who has quite different views on good and evil than we and who engages in a

tough, daily struggle for survival, be lovingly led to a God from whom he can expect no mercy because his weakness renders him incapable of following that God's commandments?' [33]

Even in Germany, Eylmann's contribution to the knowledge of Australia has largely gone unacknowledged. His interest in Australia was severely disrupted by the First World War and never recovered. Apart from the relatively brief biography of Eylmann published by Otto Bunzendahl in 1938, there is just one largely hagiographic biographical study by Wilfried Schröder. [34] In Australia, Eylmann's profile has remained low, above all because his book has never been made available to an Australian readership in a complete translation. The ethnographic knowledge which he collected at great cost to himself has largely been lost on the continent to which he devoted his life's work. This is unlikely to change until a full translation of his work becomes available.

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[1] Erhard Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908.

[2] Otto Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann und seine Sammlung im Deutschen Kolonial- und Übersee-Museum zu Bremen', *Veröffentlichungen aus dem Deutschen Kolonial- und Uebersee-Museum in Bremen*, 2, 1 (1938), 33-80.

[3] There is one book-length biography of Eylmann: Wilfried Schröder, '*Ich reiste wie ein Buschmann*': *Zum Leben und Wirken des Australienforschers Erhard Eylmann*, Bremen: Science Edition Publications, 2006.

[4] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 33.

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[7] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 39-40.

[8] Information courtesy email from Nils Seethaler of the *Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, 16 January 2013.

[9] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 61.

[10] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 60, 63.

[11] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 60.

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[13] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 40.

[14] From the beginning of 1901, the colony of South Australia became part of the federated Commonwealth of Australia; from 1911 control of the Northern Territory was passed from South Australia to the Commonwealth.

[15] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 7.

[16] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 43-51.

[17] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 51-55.

[18] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 55-56.

[19] Bunzendahl, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 57.

[20] Erhard Eylmann, 'Die Vogelwelt des südöstlichen Teiles vom Staate Südaustralien', *Journal für Ornithologie*, 59 (1911), 259-99; Erhard Eylmann, 'Die Vogelwelt des südöstlichen Teiles vom Staate Südaustralien', *Journal für Ornithologie*, 62 (1914), 1-35; Erhard Eylmann, 'Das Bettelwesen in dem Staate Südaustralien und dem Nordterritorium vor dem Weltkriege', *Mitteilungen der Geographischen Gesellschaft Hamburg*, 34 (1922), 57-98.

[21] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 299.

[22] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 258-277.

[23] Peter Monteath, 'Erhard Eylmann's Missionary Position', *Anthropological Forum*, 27, 3 (2017), 240-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2017.1365690>

[24] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 35-36, 72-74, 241-42.

[25] Gillen means here Emin Pasha, who was born in Silesia into a German-Jewish family under the name Isaak Eduard Schnitzer. He studied medicine and became a doctor but then entered the service of the Ottoman empire, travelling and working widely within it before appearing in Khartoum in 1875. There he practised medicine and pursued his scientific interests, hence the similarity to Eylmann. From 1878 he was appointed governor of the province of Equatoria.

[26] Letter, Gillen to Spencer, 25 April 1896, in D. J. Mulvaney, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch (eds.), *'My dear Spencer': the letters of F.J. Gillen to Baldwin Spencer*, South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997, 115.

[27] Baldwin Spencer and FJ Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1899, 631.

[28] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 3, 4, 20.

[29] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 54.

[30] Eylman, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 54-55.

[31] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 450.

[32] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 451.

[33] Eylmann, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien*, 464.

[34] Bunzendahl, Otto, 'Der Australien-Forscher Dr. Erhard Eylmann', 33-80; Schröder, 'Ich reiste wie ein Buschmann'.