

An Empathetic Female Ethnographer in Australia: The Life and Work of Katie Langloh Parker

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Introductory Note: Aboriginal Australians are advised that this article contains the names of deceased people. As a white Anglo-Australian woman, I underline my respect for the Yuwaalaraay people, past and present.

Introduction

From 1879 to 1901, Katie Langloh Parker (1856–1940) lived among the Noongahburrah (Nhunggabarra) of the Narran River region—members of the larger Euahlayi (Yuwaalaraay) tribe—whose country stretched across forty-six hundred square miles in far northern New South Wales. In 1905 she published *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*, Archibald Constable and Company Ltd, London. She documented a significant body of knowledge from Noongahburrah oral tradition and was confident that her study of the “manners, customs, beliefs, and legends of the Aborigines of Australia was an important contribution to ethnographic enquiry” (Parker 2018 [1905]: 17). By 1922, the study of human societies and their cultures was beginning to be recognized as the discipline of social anthropology. Parker’s vital contributions to anthropological knowledge places her within the annals of a discipline to which she deservedly belongs. [1]

Born Catherine Eliza Somerville Field on 1 May 1856 at Encounter Bay, South Australia, Katie understood from an early age that Australia was made up of many different Indigenous nations, living on their own separate country and with their own language and culture and customary laws, beliefs, and stories. Her pastoralist father Henry Field farmed on the

country of the Ramindjeri. In 1859 the family moved to Marra Station, ninety miles north-east of Wilcannia, on the Darling River, to Paakantyi country. Katie also had opportunities to grow close to Aboriginal people. As a child of almost six years, she was saved from drowning in the river by the family’s Aboriginal nursemaid “Miola,” who was unable to save Katie’s two sisters (Parker 2018 [1905]: 17; Dawson 2012). Miola subsequently joined the surviving Field children in the school lessons provided by their mother.



Fig. 1.

Katie Langloh Parker (Mrs. Stow). Sydney, 1912. This photograph appeared in *The Lone Hand* magazine.

© National Library of Australia, Papers of Marcie Muir relating to Katie Langloh Parker (NLA MS 10182/3/19).

Life in Outback Australia

In January 1875, aged eighteen, Katie married Langloh Parker (1840–1903) and they moved in 1879 to Bangate station, a sheep and cattle station, in the remote outback regions of Australia near Goodooga in far northern New South Wales, 530 miles north-west of Sydney. By 1887 it stretched across 215,408 acres (336 square miles), with more than 100,000 sheep and several thousand head of cattle (Muir 1982: 34–35). Because her husband was a popular and well-known colonial pastoralist, being much older than Katie, she adopted her husband’s first name “Langloh” for her publications, to give her books a notable profile.

Bangate was a huge property typical of others “taken up” by Europeans on Indigenous ancestral land. It had a large, predominantly male workforce, including Indigenous workers. Occasionally a white female cook or laundress might be employed on the station but, as lower-class workers, they were considered unsuitable companions for the wife of the owner. A fall from a horse soon after Katie’s arrival at Bangate precluded any further riding activities and prevented her from visiting neighboring females of her own class, who might live hundreds of miles away on distant properties. Childless, in a male-dominated and isolated environment, she turned to the local Noongahburrah people to compensate for loneliness, and for companionship.

Although she briefly attended a Girls' School in Adelaide when she was sixteen, after the death of her mother in childbirth, Katie was otherwise 'home-schooled' ('Life and Times of an Australian Collector: Catherine Langloh Parker' no. 36; Muir 1990). Intelligent and well read, she had been taught by parents with a high educational standard: her maternal grandmother could read the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Her father, who had had a classical education, taught his children about Greek life and culture and also read to them aboriginal legends. Knowing about Greek and aboriginal mythology, she approached the Noongahburrah, curious to hear their traditional stories and eager to gain an intellectual outlet in her solitude.

Katie Parker's opportunities for carrying out "fieldwork" were as close as the area outside her front door. Living alongside the Noongahburrah, sharing life on their traditional lands for over twenty years, she writes that she gained their trust, learned their language and associated dialects, and established close relationships. She could speak and understand the Noongahburrah language and she recorded and transcribed it. The Aboriginal women generously incorporated her into Noongahburrah society, giving her the aboriginal name "Innerah," which meant "a woman with a camp of her own" (Parker 2018 [1905]: 100).

Parker collected her data primarily through interactive conversations and by listening to and observing the tribal rituals and ceremonies. She used the same ethnographic methods as Malinowski's, cited as "watching [the Trobriand Islanders] daily at work and at play, conversing with them in their own tongue, and deriving all . . . information from the surest sources—personal observation and statements made to [the ethnographer] directly by the natives in their own language" and, importantly in ethnographical practice, by grasping "the native's point of view", (Malinowski 1972 [1922]: vii–viii, 24–25). Through these means she was able to produce an account of Noongahburrah culture as she observed it, elements of which she could compare with other ethnographic findings and relate to anthropological theories of her time.

For her information, Parker was utterly dependent on Noongahburrah cultural experts, relying on four main "informants": Peter Hippi, Hippitha, Barahgurrie and Beemunny. The chief one was Peter Hippi to whom she dedicated her collection of *Australian Legendary Tales*. Through patient repetitions from the Noongahburrah, she learned some of the Euahlayi language and assiduously transcribed their legends. All the ethnographical findings were checked and double-checked with the Aboriginal collaborators, and were unsullied by any of her own interpretative additions that might have allowed her own ideas or prejudices to intrude. By her own assertion, she was scrupulous in reproducing the exact translation of Euahlayi knowledge. At the end of *Australian Legendary Tales*, she wrote down the story of Dinewan Boollarhnah Goomblegubbon in aboriginal language (Parker 1998 [1896]: 126–28), and in *Australian Legendary Tales, More Australian Legendary Tales* and *The Euahlayi Tribe*, she provided three different glossaries.

As the daughter and wife of colonial landholders, who had settled on huge tracts of aboriginal territory at a time of pastoral expansion and as the mistress to young Aboriginal

women who worked in menial household jobs in a manipulative power imbalance, Katie Parker was complicit in colonization. (Evans, Grimshaw, and Standish 2003: 15). It was through the friendly, accommodating and kindly attitude of the Noongahburrah that they accepted her. She grew close to them and learned to know them as individuals. A mutual trust engendered personal conversations between the white woman and the Noongahburrah.

The All Father, Byamee, and the Initiation of Young Males

During the 1890s, the Noongahburrah still maintained connection to their land, where they continued to fulfil their sacred obligations and to respect their traditional laws through their ceremonial and social activities. One of Parker's contributions to social anthropology was to record the Noongahburrah's interpretation of their belief in Byamee (Baiame)—the 'All Father' or 'High God'—albeit in an evolving time in their history when the process of colonization changed elements of their belief.

Parker learned that Byamee (Baiame), meaning "big man" or "Great One"—known to the women as Boyjerh—was a belief that predated any missionary contact. The evidence came from Yudtha Dulleebah, "said to have been already grey haired when [the European 'explorer'] Sir Thomas Mitchell discovered the Narran in 1846." The estimated date of the Aboriginal elder's initiation (and his first knowledge of Byamee) was 1830. She adds that "[Byamee] was a worshipful being, revealed in the mysteries, long before missionaries came, as all my informants aver" (Parker 2018 [1905]: 20–21). Her informed knowledge on ritual observances and ethical teachings contributed to the subject of "primitive monotheism"—the original belief in an All-Father "God" in precontact Indigenous societies—a topic that continues to engage anthropologists in historical debate. And these essential findings on Byamee joined and supported those of Sir Alfred Howitt (1830–1908) (Howitt 1996 [1904]: 488–508).

Another important contribution was the recording of the Noongahburrah's ceremonial rites and practices, their laws and sacred observances. In particular, she was able to describe in intricate detail the Boorah—or male initiation ceremony. Parker explained the long and complex preparations, the invitations sent out to neighbouring groups—and *their* participation—and even observed the machinations that went on behind the scenes of these public ceremonies. She was also given access to some religious secrets (Parker 2018 [1905]: 75–93. These analytical accounts also contributed to the work done by Howitt, and by Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) and Francis Gillen (1855–1912).

"Phratries, Totems, and Subtotems"

The Euahlayi tribe was divided into four "phratries," or "matrimonial classes"—derived through the maternal line of descent—and further subdivided by their totems and subtotems. These totemic families claimed relationship with trees, plants, animals or

insects. Every small thing in the natural world had its attached story or legend. (Parker's first two books were about these legends.) In *The Euahlayi Tribe*, her organization of the Noongahburrah totems and subtotems contributed to theoretical debates about marriage classes, and group and individual totemism. She again corresponded with Howitt on marriage laws, adding her own knowledge to his findings on kinship and social organization of the neighboring Kamilaroi people. [2] Her contribution in recording and deciphering these details is particularly pertinent because she had learned that "in most Australian tribes the meanings of the names of phratries are lost," and in the case of the neighboring Kamilaroi (the large Gamilaraay Indigenous group) some phratries were of "unknown significance" (Parker 2018 [1905]: 26). In *The Euahlayi Tribe*, the nomenclatures of the totem system ("the great Dhe") and its associated intratribal relationships cover eight explanatory pages (ibid.: 30–37).

"Secret Women's Business"

In particular, as a female ethnographer, Katie Parker's closeness to and the affection shared between her and two key Indigenous female elders—Beemunny and Bootha—gave her access to arcane feminine knowledge. She recorded the Noongahburrah women's experience and cultural stories surrounding female initiation, betrothal, marriage, childbirth and the raising of children. These beliefs, customs and practices formed a field of study, left largely unexamined by male ethnographers. She recorded the agency, authority and identity within the group of these older women. Through their interaction with Parker, the women allowed her direct and personal participation in customary practices, such as burial rites. Her friendship and empathy with the women enabled her to write of their personalities and life events with sympathy and warmth; her descriptive accounts, with their intricate details, were told with sensitivity.

Furthermore, Parker's reporting of how "spirit-babies" are "usually despatched to Waddahgudjaelwon [a birth-presiding spirit] and sent by her to hang promiscuously on trees, until some woman passes under where they are, then they will seize a mother and be incarnated," relates her ethnology to another major anthropological debate of the time (and during the twentieth century)—on supernatural or "virgin" birth—which predated but was particularly fueled by Spencer and Gillen's Arunta/Arrernte ethnology in their *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899). Katie acknowledged that "this resembles the Arunta belief, but with the Euahlayi the spirits are new freshly created beings, not reincarnations of ancestral souls, as among the Arunta" (Parker 2018 [1905]: 65).

Anthropological Reputation

Julie Evans has called Parker's "reputation as a leader in the field of early ethnographic practice in Australia... far from clear-cut," despite her work continuing to attract "critical attention for well over a century" (Evans 2011: 18).

R. H. Mathews (1841–1918) had recognized the value of Parker’s early works (Thomas 2007: 127, 131, 157; Mathews 1898: 143). Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and the academic anthropologist E. O. James (1888–1972) acknowledged her findings on “primitive monotheism” (Durkheim 1976 [1912]: 285–89; James 1917: 191–93). Robert Lowie (1883–1957) referred to her “unimpeachable testimony” on the Euahlayi’s “high-god” Byamee (Lowie 1925 [1924]: 145–46).

Northcote W. Thomas (1868–1936) wrote favorably that *The Euahlayi Tribe* stood “entirely alone ... in getting at such secret matters as male initiation ceremonies and beliefs about Byamee, all of which are strictly forbidden lore to the Euahlayi woman”(Thomas 1906a: 610). His review in *Man* extols her book for offering details of “fundamental importance” and for its scope and depth of analysis on the “burning anthropological questions” (Thomas 1906b: 42–43). The London *Athenaeum* similarly applauded *The Euahlayi Tribe* as offering “first-hand evidence of the best kind” and found the book—“full of material for discussion on [many] abstruse points”—to be a “substantial contribution to our knowledge of the Australian aborigines.” [3]

In 1908, the German anthropologist Moritz von Leonhardi (1856–1910) had cited her findings in discussion with Mathews (cit. in Thomas 2007: 246); and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), prior to his deprecation of ethnographers who were not academically trained, referred extensively to her work in *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* (1913), particularly in respect to Euahlayi marriage and betrothal. The folklorist Andrew Lang (1844–1912) had long supported and encouraged Parker’s work and wrote the Introduction to *The Euahlayi Tribe*.

Parker had continued to publish traditional stories: *My Best Boy and My Boy-in-Law and Bobbity, a Bush Baby* (1901), *The Walkabouts of Wur-Run-Nah* (1918) and *Woggheeguy: Australian Aboriginal Legends* (1930). In 1931, French scholar and philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) was to include and acknowledge her work in his *Primitives and the Supernatural* (Lévy-Bruhl 1936 [1931]). While her *Australian Legendary Tales* continued to be published internationally into the twenty-first century, her reputation as an ethnographer faded.

Several factors may have contributed to disinterest in Parker’s work. The later addition of ‘Mrs.’ to her title—‘K. Langloh Parker’—had identified her as a woman in an increasingly male domain. *The Euahlayi Tribe* was published at a time when men were beginning to assert their dominance in the developing science of anthropology. Male interests did not encompass female values, beliefs and practices. Being colonial, largely self-educated and not part of the current anthropological “elite” were possible contributions to her obscurity. Intellectual anthropologists’ focus on anthropological theory may also have been a reason for excluding her. In 1965, Evans-Pritchard also suggested that theories on religious beliefs and practices of primitive man were “as dead as mutton” for anthropologists and had ceased to occupy “men’s minds” as they had in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 100).

Although popular, the publications of her earlier books—*Australian Legendary Tales* (1896) and *More Australian Legendary Tales* (1898)—were marketed for children or as ‘folklore’ by the publishing firm, David Nutt, thus downplaying her ethnographical expertise. A disregard for Indigenous Australians within the self-confident nationalism that was part of the newly federated (in 1901) Australia may also have dampened interest in the ‘First Australians’. Further contributing factors could have been the change in her name and circumstances. Widowed in 1903, she remarried in 1905—the same year that *The Euahlayi Tribe* was published—and left the outback to live an active but genteel life in Adelaide. Perhaps the main reason was the hiatus in any major anthropological work, although she continued to write articles for magazines and journals from Adelaide under her name, Catherine Stow (Gale 2000: 3).

After a long gap in interest, Marcie Muir’s *My Bush Book: K. Langloh Parker’s 1890s Story of Outback Station Life* (1982) catapulted Parker’s writing into the consciousness of the Australian public. The author’s husband, a bookseller, had purchased Parker’s papers in 1940 and urged Marcie to write her biography. *My Bush Book* includes the release of Katie’s own autobiographical work: “My Bush Book, Based on the notebooks of an old-time squatter’s wife, 1879–1901, by K. Langloh Parker” (Parker, unpublished manuscript, in Muir 1982: 45–141).

In the last twenty years, scholarly research has revived Parker’s reputation in academia. Hilary Carey’s 1998 article “The Land of Byamee” posits her interpretation of Byamee within the Noongahburrah’s spiritual belief system that flourished during the “assimilation era” (Carey 1998: 200–201, 203). Mary-Anne Gale acknowledges Parker’s ethnographical significance in her thesis ‘Poor Bugger Whitefella Got No Dreaming’ (Gale 2000: 75, 76). Serena Fredrick includes her contribution to ethnoastronomy through the legends she recorded from Noongahburrah knowledge, including those found in *The Euahlayi Tribe* chapter, “Something about Stars and Legends” (Fredrick 2008: 22; Parker 2018 [1905]: 106–109). Again, anthropologist Ian Keen’s *Aboriginal Economy and Society* (2004) leaned strongly on Parker’s work, particularly for his comparative analyses on Indigenous belief and doctrines, social organization and mobility, the role of ancestral law, initiation ceremonies and power relations in social governance, and the economic factors in the control and organization of production (Keen 2004: 220–23; 112–14; 253–55; 283–85).

Conclusion

Katie Parker brought detailed observations and perceptive understandings to the field of scientific ethnology. Her long-term access to her cultural experts surpassed some of her male contemporaries. Not confining her analyses to the Euahlayi alone, her incorporation of references to other Indigenous groups extends the scope and depth of her contributions. Her interest and involvement in current anthropological thought, evidenced by her inclusion of the work of other researchers, set her firmly within the expanding discipline of anthropology.

Although somewhat dismissed after publication in 1905, *The Euahlayi Tribe* is still relevant today, not only within the ongoing history of social anthropology—through the depth of the Euahlayi cultural knowledge (their ceremonies, rules and behaviours)—that Parker recorded, but also from her warm depictions of the generosity of the Noongahburrah, who welcomed the white woman onto their country, befriended, and essentially cared for her over their time together.

Parker wrote at a time in Australia’s history when the forces of the assimilation of Indigenous people (into white society) were in danger of changing, even obliterating, Indigenous customs and belief systems. At this time—at the end of the nineteenth century—there was a popular idea that the Aborigines were ‘a race fast dying out’. Parker’s ethnographical work of recording Noongahburrah culture and practices rescued this cultural knowledge.

First Nations people now find their contribution to modern Australia increasingly acknowledged. After the 2022 Australian Federal Elections, there were eleven Australians of Indigenous descent serving in the Australian Federal Parliament. Academic interest in Aboriginal History—and the benefits that can be applied to Australian society from Indigenous culture—is increasing. Parker’s validation of Indigenous cultural strength can be seen as a foundation for this growing appreciation.

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[1] This is an extended version of a paper presented for panel discussion at the *Virtual Round Table: Before and after Malinowski: Alternative Views on the History of Anthropology*, at the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, on 7 July 2022. It discusses the ethnographical contributions of K. Langloh Parker, particularly in her book *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia* (1905). A previous version of this article appeared as Chapter 2, entitled "'A Sympathetic Chronicler of a Sympathetic People': Katie Langloh Parker and *The Euahlayi Tribe* (1905)", in Frederico Delgado Rosa and Han F. Vermeulen (eds), *Ethnographers Before Malinowski: Pioneers of Anthropological Fieldwork, 1870–1922*. Foreword by Thomas Hylland Eriksen. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books (EASA Series 44), June 2022. xviii + 522 pp. 29 ill.

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[3] *The Athenaeum: Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, the Fine Arts, Music and the Drama*, London, no. 4103, 16 June 1906, p. 735.