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Campfire masterpiece

The republication of the exploration 'jottings' of Francis Gillen is a landmark moment in Australian intellectual history.

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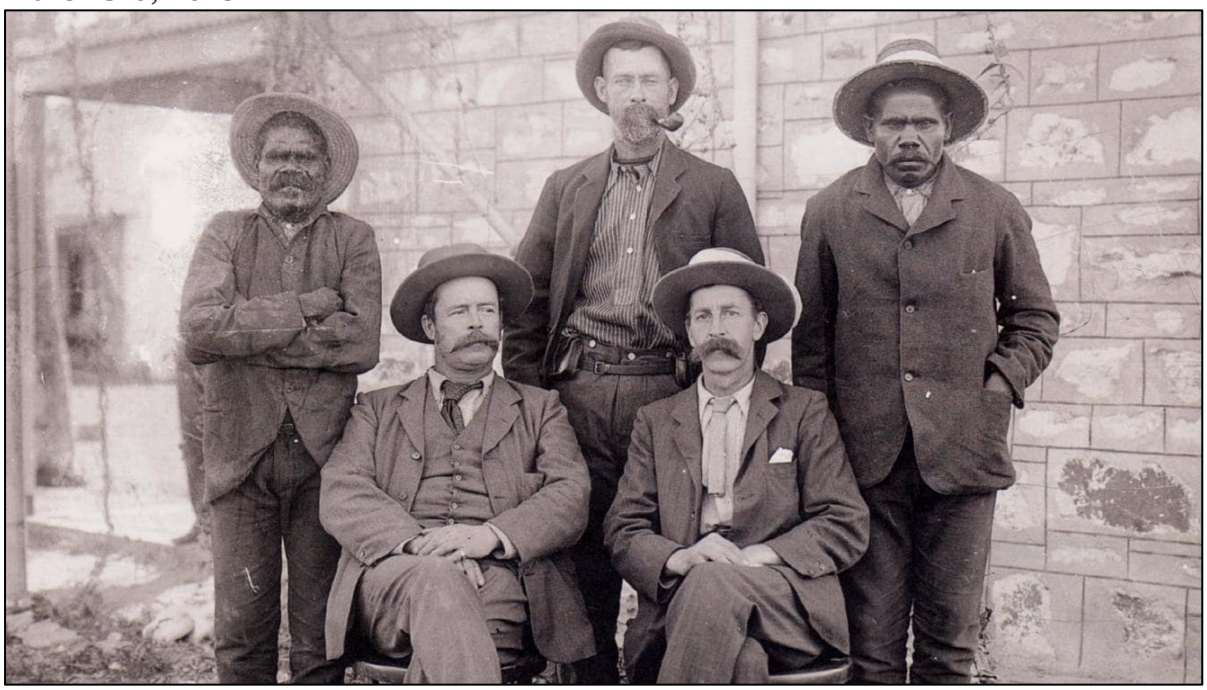
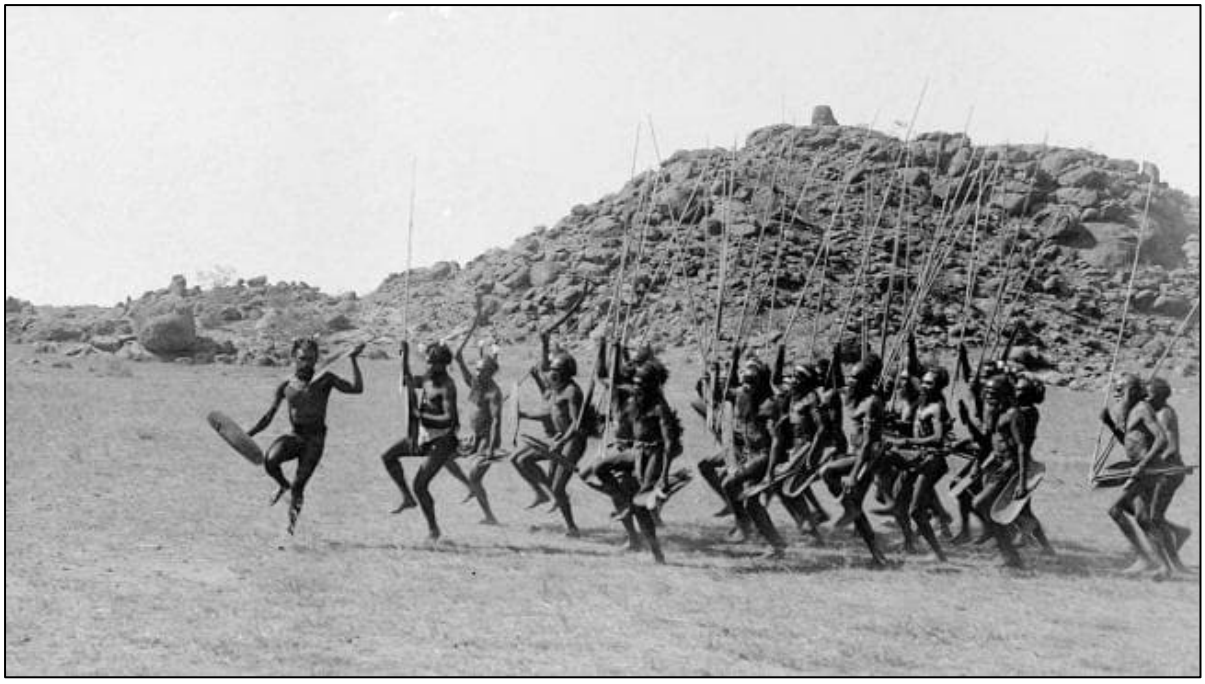


Front row: Frank Gillen, left, and Baldwin Spencer on their 1901 expedition. Picture: From the book The Photographs of Baldwin Spencer, Museum of Victoria.

Early in the morning of August 28, 1901, almost at the mid-point of their expedition across the heartland of Australia, celebrated scientist Walter Baldwin Spencer and his friend and colleague Francis Gillen set off on a most unusual side trip, picking their way up the winding course of the Murchison River, following their Aboriginal guides along the creation track carved out by the great snake Walunkwa.

This was very likely the first such ethnographic foray mounted in Australia: a bush excursion made not merely to record the material culture and behaviour of indigenous people but to seek to understand their beliefs. All modern anthropological research into Aboriginal mythological sites and their associated ceremonies and traditions descends from its example.

The results of Spencer and Gillen's brief voyage on indigenous terms into the dreamtime are given in precise, dispassionate detail in the landmark 1904 work they wrote in the wake of their 18-month expedition, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*. But a much more revealing, and more intimate, account can be found in Gillen's "camp jottings", a forgotten jewel of Australian literature now being published in full for the first time, 50 years after a bowdlerised first edition went into print.



A photograph from the 1901 Gillen-Spencer expedition of the Arrernte welcoming dance for the entrance of the strangers, Alice Springs, May 9, 1901.

Gillen was a yarn-spinner, a man of stories, and he sets the scene for the party's river journey in brisk and vivid fashion. The sun is up, they set off, he rides the rough country with care, his horse "gingerly heads his way over boulders & crevices slipping, sliding & tripping at every step". The group advances along the creek line. At last they come upon the quiet, rock-surrounded waterhole at Thapaurla, "a wildly weird looking spot, just the sort of place to impress the natives & after seeing it I do not wonder that they have attributed its origin to a mythical monster like the Walunkwa".

Brief, solemn rituals are then performed for the benefit of two young tribal men who have travelled with the party; darkness descends; the divide between outside witnesses and Aboriginal custodians seems almost to fall away: "We were much impressed with the reverence shown by the Natives who accompanied us," writes Gillen, "& I must confess that to a certain extent I shared in their feelings. Our visit to Thapaurla will live long in our memories."

The reappearance of the "camp jottings" in this majestic edition, rebadged as *Gillen's Modest Record*, and complete with five thematic indexes and extensive critical apparatus, is a banner event in Australian intellectual history.

Academic Baldwin Spencer, left, and postmaster Frank Gillen in 1899.

There is nothing else from its time quite like this book, whatever title is assigned to it. It brings the debates that shaped early 20th-century natural science and ethnography to life, it records the inland frontier's rich cast of characters, it gives snapshots of the Aboriginal societies in place between Alice Springs and Borroloola on the Gulf: a range of tribal men and women are sketched in sympathetic fashion and speak at length in their own words.

Spencer and Gillen had been thrown together during the pioneering 1894 Horn expedition, which undertook the first scientific survey of central Australia. Spencer was the foundation professor of biology at the University of Melbourne, and a connoisseur of art and literature; Gillen was the resident postmaster at Alice Springs and had built up close relationships with the senior Arrernte men of the region.

Spencer was an Oxford scholar and convinced man of empire; Gillen a fierce Irish nationalist and an autodidact whose formal schooling had ceased when he was 12. The two forged an improbable partnership: their joint work on central Australia revealed the complexity of Aboriginal traditions and ceremonial life, and redefined the scope of the new discipline of anthropology.

An Arrernte ceremonial leader of the emu totem, photographed by Frank Gillen. Picture: From book Images of the Interior: Seven Central Australian Photographers, by Philip Jones. SA Museum.

In the wake of their publications, the master practitioner of field research, Bronislaw Malinowski, was of the view that "half the total production in anthropological theory has been based upon their work, and nine-tenths affected or modified by it". Gillen looked up to Spencer, and their letters are the record of a deep mutual friendship. The closeness of the tie is evident in the "camp jottings" on almost every page:

It is indeed a delight to me to be in his company & I love to have him here all to myself; with no other man would I undertake to leave wife and family to spend a year in the bush, but with him as a companion I look forward, quite apart from our scientific work, to spending an enjoyable time.

Given Gillen's deferential attitude to "the Prof", it was long assumed Spencer had been the key researcher and chief author of the pair's ethnographic breakthroughs. That changed with the publication of two remarkable papers by South Australian historian Philip Jones that disclosed Gillen's primacy in their work. It was in fact he who had been the close observer and decoder of Arrernte ritual, and it was his ability to see the world through Aboriginal eyes that opened the way for Spencer's synoptic presentation of their discoveries.

How fitting, then, that Jones should be the editor of this new edition of the "jottings", which highlights Gillen's capacity for empathy and his gift for catching the mood of the desert landscape in a casual-seeming flight of words. Here he is, writing in the expedition's camp just north of the Finke River, and launching off from a brisk account of Spencer's trademark nicotine-based method for executing thorny devil specimens: "A match tipped with a little of the juice from a pipe stem kills any lizard in about 3 minutes, there is just a feeble attempt to run away, then a convulsive struggle and all is over."

The same for snakes, but they take longer. And then, almost in the same breath, Gillen shifts his focus:

It is a lovely mild night, still with the peculiar stillness of the bush, occasionally the horse bells ring out with startling effect, a cricket chirrups to his mate an invitation to come out of her retreat, a weird old Mopoke utters his harsh note, the boys sit poking sticks into the fire while they chant in low tones a corroboree song & I, well I think of Moonta and the loved ones there & wish that I could peep in & see them all.

In the southern desert, during the initial stages of the expedition, Gillen found himself in familiar country. He had worked for 12 years at Charlotte Waters overland telegraph station, familiarly known as "Bleak House", and on seeing the place again he marvelled that he could have spent "years here free from care of any sort & of absolute content".

Alice Springs, the scene of his early encounters with the Arrernte, was in the grip of drought, the gum trees he had planted around his old offices had all died, and the new township was in distinctly moribund condition: "Passing through we saw a Chinaman too intent on transporting cabbages to look at us, one wretched drunk staggering off to his camp & one other man, all the others are probably suffering a recovery."

Gillen counted nine buildings of substance: three breweries, a public house, three stores and two private dwellings. "Can any town of its size in the world produce three breweries — I doubt it. All three are shut up & present a woebegone appearance, evidently beer brewing did not pay. Some say the liquor was not strong enough for the leathern throats of the sun dried Nor Westers, others vow that the brewers were always their own best customers & consumed the amber coloured liquid before it had time to cool."

As a stipendiary bush magistrate, he was asked to hear a court case involving charges of goat stealing brought against a group of Barrow Creek Aborigines. He dismissed it out of hand, and set down his thoughts in his journal:

I am afraid that instances have occurred up here in which innocent Aboriginals have been sent to gaol & it would be a sound & fair principle if their plea were always taken as "not guilty" for some semi wild natives with very little knowledge of English

will plead guilty just for the sake of pleasing the whiteman & because they think, not having the faintest idea of the Law, that it doesn't matter.

Opinions and actions of this kind endeared Gillen to the local Aboriginal people, earned him their respect and trust, and accounted for his extraordinary access to their world.

Ceremonies were staged for him to see, objects were confided to his care, and the respect he was accorded as a formal representative of white authority was deepened by his reputation as a magic healer, able to remove the ill-effects of spells and curses by using the contents of his rough and ready medicine chest. He reciprocated the affection and enthusiasm. His diary entries display the casual condescensions of the time, and find an easy humour in the clash of worlds, but their overall tone is one of interest in and admiration for the Aboriginal cultures of the inland.

Gillen's particular position and prominence in the indigenous social network of central Australia was in fact the making of the new expedition, though this may not have been completely clear to Spencer, or even to Gillen himself. "A succession of Aboriginal groups tolerated, even welcomed, Gillen's and Spencer's close attention to their customs, beliefs and ritual life," as Jones emphasises.

News of their northern advance was relayed from tribe to tribe up the telegraph line: "Aboriginal people were soon aware that they would be encountering two European men of standing, with a proven capacity for understanding their ritual life and beliefs, not to mention a full waggon-load of goods for barter."

The pair collated story cycles, made sound and film recordings, pioneered the use of ethnographic photography and amassed a collection of more than 3000 objects, ranging from carved ritual items to weapons, digging sticks and coolamons. As they entered each new cultural zone, they were met in almost ambassadorial fashion. At sunrise on the approach to Barrow Creek they were greeted by a visit from the Kaytej headman Arabinya-urungwina, who proceeded to spend entire days with them explaining the intricacies of his culture.

Spencer and Gillen plunged ever deeper into their work, and the fine details of desert totemic systems gradually came into view. Soon they were "in seventh heaven", they could feel their project gaining in solidity and structure. Much of what they were able to establish, on mortuary and burial customs, on Aboriginal ideas about the relationship of the soul to the body and the minutiae of ritual life, has become the foundational knowledge of Australianist anthropology. Indeed, one frequently encounters dog-eared copies of Spencer and Gillen books and photography collections being used as reference material in bush communities or among outside advocates of Aboriginal cultural revival to this day.

The pair's encounters and adventures with Europeans on the frontier in the course of their journey are rather less well known but were just as highly coloured. They fell in with the Anglican bishop of Carpentaria, Gilbert White, who had a pronounced fondness for relaying tall stories from the backblocks. At Tennant Creek, which, for Gillen, "takes the cake for absolute dreariness", they spent time with the dipsomaniacal Tom Nugent, part-owner of Banka Banka station and former leader of the "Ragged Thirteen", a group of bushrangers and cattle rustlers who wreaked havoc throughout the 1880s across the north.

He is physically & socially a very fine type of the old time bushman but like most of his class he is addicted to whiskey in large doses when it can be procured which luckily for him is very very seldom. When under the influence of what he terms the "divine fluid" he is in the habit of informing all and sundry that he is Thomas O'Brien Harrington Nugent, the worst of the Nugents, the best man in the North.

Tennant Creek proved to be the expedition's inflection point. The depredations against Aborigines in the savanna country ahead had been so severe there was little in the way of ethnographic information to gather farther up the telegraph line. The party decided to head eastwards instead, across the Barkly Tableland, and make for the distant shoreline of the Gulf. It was October by now, full build-up: thunderstorms, lightning, air as damp as a soaking rag.

They reached the way-stage of OT Lagoon, the first permanent water on their route, and the site of a failing cattle run, marked by a single primitive hut. "It is open so we wandered in & found it occupied by a dilapidated box table & a lopsided greenhide bunk, both looking rather ashamed of themselves." What an existence!

"People who live comfortably in the towns do not realise what these hardy 'way back' pioneers have to put up with in their struggle for fortune," mused Gillen. "No life could be more colourless or absolutely devoid of human interest than that lived at a place like this where one is completely out of touch with the world & away from the beaten paths over which the ordinary bush traveller roams."

They started travelling through more settled station country, and the Aboriginal groups they met were markedly less friendly and co-operative. Soon they struck the wide, free-flowing McArthur River: the realm of crocodiles and screw-palms and pandanus. Ahead lay the little township of Borroloola, where they expected to find a steamer to take them home.

In vain: they were marooned for months, and were obliged to celebrate Christmas in the low-slung, wide-porticoed police station with the regional elite. After months on a bush-camp diet, a lavish spread was put before them: mutton, beef, roast fowl, three sorts of vegetables, plum duff, blancmange, tinned and fresh fruits, wine and liquor, coffee, cigars.

Up the road, a market gardener held a rival dinner for seven or eight itinerant swagmen who happened to be passing through: three cases of beer were laid on, the harmonious meal degenerated into a fight, and the guests in various stages of intoxication made their ways "unsteadily in all directions" until silence fell at last. "So endeth the record of my Christmas of 1901," wrote Gillen. "May the fates preserve me from such another."

The tropical rains were now falling constantly, the country was turning a lush green, the nights resounded to the song of a million frogs. Relief eventually came six weeks later, in the form of Captain Myers of the steamer Vigilant, who had been dispatched to rescue them by the Queensland government.

The pair headed south by stages, calling in at the northern Gulf townships, then Brisbane, where a gathering of members of the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society awaited them. Spencer made his way back to his academic post

in Melbourne and to continued fame. Gillen returned to his post office at Moonta in country South Australia, to lingering illness and early death.

Much is in play in the "camp jottings", which were set down initially as a letter-diary for Gillen's wife to read but soon expanded into a more detailed record as the northward journey took on a rhythm and a shape. Ideas, impressions, observations all form strands in the narrative, but it is above all the account of a sensibility, a receptive mind at work.

Gillen understood his part in late colonial history, as portraitist of an elusive life-world, and it seems plain he was as much interested by the characters of the Aboriginal men and women he met as by the peculiarities of their customs. Both supplement to Spencer's text of *The Northern Tribes* and snapshot of the inland frontier in its last days, the "jottings" also serve to highlight Gillen's part in the fieldwork revolution that helped shift anthropology to its 20th-century "participant observer" paradigm.

There was a special note of urgency about Gillen's descriptive enterprise: he, like Spencer, believed Aboriginal culture was being eroded by Western influence, and was doomed to fade away: "The blackfellow as soon as he casts aside his own customs & takes on those of the white man begins to decay physically and morally & in every other respect. It is sad but it is so."

This bleak purism put Spencer and Gillen at odds with the missionaries of central Australia, whose entire purpose was to usher the Arrernte and other tribal groups into Western modernity. The divide between these two perspectives is prolonged in the arguments of more recent times over the conduct of indigenous affairs, and finds echoes in debates between assimilationists, advocates of bicultural development and supporters of outstation separatism.

What, though, is the place of Gillen's marvellously humane and vivid frontier studies in our day, with the position of Aboriginal people in the central deserts so greatly transformed? What are the "jottings"? A voyeuristic record, a priceless treasure of the shared Australian past, a necrology? Who owns the information, and to what end? The ambiguous position of the classic texts of Australian anthropology, many of them literary and intellectual gems, at once revered and thrust to the margins, tells its own tale.

That tension is evident on the modern version of the frontier, where Spencer and Gillen's heirs and descendants pursue the dream of even-handed cross-cultural studies. When the onlooker's gaze is all-powerful, it can take on a scorching force. Gillen's half-articulated grasp of this dark logic lends distinction to his casually thrown-off campfire masterpiece.

Nicolas Rothwell's most recent book, Quicksilver, won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for nonfiction.

Gillen's Modest Record: Francis Gillen's Journal of the 1901-1902 Spencer-Gillen Expedition

Edited by Philip Jones

Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 538pp, $40