2016

Giving voice to silence: Uncovering Bertha Strehlow's voice through poetry

Leni Shilton
Southern Cross University

Publication details
Shilton, L 2016, 'Giving voice to silence: Uncovering Bertha Strehlow's voice through poetry', PhD thesis, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW.
Copyright L Shilton 2016
Giving voice to silence:

Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry

Submitted by
Leni Shilton

Bachelor of Health Science (CSU)
Master of Letters (CQU)

A thesis submitted in total fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Arts and Social Science

Southern Cross University
Lismore, NSW

February 2016
Thesis Declaration

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University’s rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research awards and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

Signature: 

Date: 14th February 2016
Abstract

_Giving voice to silence:_ Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry

‘Giving voice to silence: Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry’ documents and explores issues of feminism, race relations and marriage in the post-colonial experience of Central Australia in the years between the first and second world wars. The thesis consists of an original creative work and accompanying exegesis. _Giving voice to silence_ is a verse novel exploring the story of the historical figure Bertha Strehlow, who lived in Central Australia from 1936–1942. The novel focuses particular attention on the camel trek she took with her husband in 1936 when she came close to death following a miscarriage.

The exegesis ‘Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry’, is presented in two parts: _History and background_ explores Bertha Strehlow’s story by providing an insight into her marriage and her role in the development of her husband’s career, set against the political, historical and cultural backdrop of Central Australia. Drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the ‘two books’ (1997, p. 72), these chapters also explore the complexities of fictionalising the story of an historical figure. Bertha’s story and my own story are intertwined in place. This is examined in a chapter on the creative practice of journaling.

_Poetry, poetics and the verse novel_ interrogates the poetry of the verse novel as a genre with reference to the success of the genre in providing biographical and historical accounts. By drawing on biographical verse novels such as _The Darwin Poems_ (Ballou, 2010), _Jane, Lady Franklin_ (Eberhard, 2004) and _What a piece of work_ (Porter, 1999), this section examines the development of narrative, character and voice in poetry, providing an in-depth critique of the genre to reveal its effectiveness as a vehicle for providing voice to Bertha Strehlow.

Though based on historical events, the use of fiction in the poetry of _Giving voice to silence_ provides a mediated voice for Bertha, around whom there has been a significant silence in the historical dialogue. This is despite the profound contribution she made to the work of her husband, prominent linguist and anthropologist, TGH (Ted) Strehlow.
Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to my supervisors; to Lynda Hawryluk, for her guidance and thoroughness throughout the PhD, and to Moya Costello for her encouragement and insights.

My thanks to Southern Cross University, for granting me a Postgraduate Scholarship, and the School of Arts and Social Science for support to travel to conferences in Barcelona and Canberra during my candidature. My thanks also, to La Trobe University, and to CQUniversity, for assistance at the outset of this project. I am grateful to my colleagues at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Alice Springs for support and invaluable conversations, and to the faculty for granting me leave to study.

Thank you to Varuna – The National Writers House, and to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, for a residential scholarship to travel to the Blue Mountains and Ireland, where chapters of the exegesis were written and edited.

Bertha’s story would not have come to light without the support of the current and past staff of the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs. My thanks especially to Graeme Shaughnessy for his support and knowledge, and to John Strehlow, for his generosity and patience in talking to me about his mother Bertha.

I gratefully acknowledge the traditional owners of Kaltjutjara (Docker River) and the Central Lands Council for granting me permission to travel to the Petermann Ranges where many of Bertha’s poems were written. I acknowledge also the traditional owners of Alice Springs, the Arrernte people, where my PhD is based and where my home is.

I am grateful for the support of my fellow PhD travellers Glenn Morrison and Jenny Taylor. To poets, Deb Westbury, Meg Mooney, Sue Fielding and Shari Kocher for their wisdom. And to fellow writers Jo Dutton and Mary Anne Butler for their inspiration and support.

To my dear family and friends who generously read and critiqued the work and provided me with feedback, this work would not have happened without you.

My very special thanks and love goes to Chris Shilton, who as well as reading every word more than once, has kept me in good humour throughout, and to my beautiful children; Liam and Lahni, Todd and Darcy; and their partners, Sarah and Tayla, for their patience.
Publications

Individual poems have appeared in the following publications:

# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations /List of family members</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note on orthography</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map of Bertha Strehlow’s 1936 journey</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse Novel: <em>Giving voice to silence</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronology of Events</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exegesis: Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference List</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

SRC - Strehlow Research Centre (Alice Springs)
CLC – Central Lands Council

List of family members mentioned and referred to

B Strehlow – Bertha (nee James)
G James – George (Bertha’s father)
TGH Strehlow – Ted (Bertha’s husband 1935-67)
TJ Strehlow – Theo (Bertha’s eldest son)
S Crawley – Shirley (Bertha’s daughter)
J Strehlow – John (Bertha’s youngest son)
CFT Strehlow – Carl (Ted’s father, missionary at Hermannsburg 1896–1922)
F Strehlow – Frieda (Bertha’s mother-in-law, wife of Carl, mother of Ted)
R Strehlow – Roti (Bertha’s daughter-in-law, cousin and wife of Theo)
W Strehlow – Wighard (Ted’s cousin)
K Strehlow – Kathleen (Ted’s second wife 1972–78)
C Strehlow – Carl (Ted and Kathleen’s son)
Note on orthography and units of measurement

The Arrernte orthography throughout this work uses the historical Hermannsburg spelling of ‘Aranda’. I have not sought to correct the spelling of place names, or to change miles to kilometres; these remain as cited in the original texts.
Map of Bertha Strehlow’s 1936 journey

With permission: Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, 2006
Giving voice to silence
The story of Bertha Strehlow is one of resilience and persistence, physical strength and determination. Her achievements have gone largely unnoticed and her name may only be known in relation to her husband. Bertha was the first wife of TGH (Ted) Strehlow, the son of the pioneering Lutheran Hermannsburg missionaries, Carl and Frieda Strehlow. Bertha and Ted married in 1935 in Adelaide after they had met at Adelaide University, where Bertha completed a Bachelor of Arts. They spent four months of their first year of marriage travelling through south-western Central Australia on camels, recording the numbers of Aboriginal family groups in the area and the conditions they lived in during the course of Ted’s research. Bertha came close to death on this journey after a miscarriage.

In the early years of their marriage Bertha set up their home in a tent at Jay Creek, an Aboriginal Reserve west of Alice Springs. They lived in the tent for two years before their house was built. As a further four pregnancies ended in miscarriage, Bertha stayed closer to medical assistance, while Ted continued to travel throughout Central Australia in his role as Patrol Officer. They worked together as Ted wrote up his findings on language and culture, with Bertha typing and editing his work and supporting him. Eventually their first child Theo was born at Jay Creek. In 1942, after six years in Central Australia, they moved back to Adelaide. Bertha gave birth to their two other children there.

The marriage broke down in 1968 after 33 years. After the divorce, Bertha and her three children were left only with Bertha’s childhood home. While covering the period of time until divorce, the verse novel has its main focus on Bertha’s experiences in Central Australia.
I have to state my identity. I have to reconstruct the world
...this way I make my own experience coherent.
I join me to the world
– Ania Walwicz

Contents

Chapter 1  Beginnings  5
Chapter 2  Walking with camels  25
Chapter 3  Into the west – the Petermann Ranges  43
Chapter 4  Six years in Jay Creek  70
Chapter 5  The dream  97
Chapter 1

Beginnings
At the dance

I’d heard about him –
the smart one, born in the desert,
making the languages of Central Australia his own.
He is shy, handsome and dances well.

His accent is polished, but I hear the German
reach through his voice
when I tell him an old flame has married.
His heart so open, so red raw
I want to cover it.

I tell him she’s a fool.
‘I wouldn’t let you
slip through my fingers.’

He stops mid-step,
the music rolling around us,
he has just seen me
for the first time.

Bertha (nee James) first met Ted Strehlow in 1932 when he was in his Honours year, but it was at a University of Adelaide hockey team dance in 1934 that they saw each other with new eyes. He was not long back from a field trip in Central Australia when he learnt that a young woman he was interested in had recently married (Hill 2003, p. 228). Ted’s biographer Ward McNally says, ‘From that evening, Strehlow courted Bertha with a fervour that surprised friends, and seemed to sweep the young woman off her feet’ (1981, p. 43).
Heart of darkness\(^2\)

I tell my university friends
I’m going, leaving.
‘With him?’
‘Yes – off on an adventure!’

They can’t see past the strangeness
of my frowning fiancé,
and look worried.

I aim to have a wonderful time
and tell them so;
‘It will be like
going into the heart of darkness
in my own
country.’

Bertha’s marriage to the brilliant but self-absorbed Ted didn’t sit well with many of her friends and throughout her marriage she worked hard to stay in touch with her university peers. She spent a great deal of time in the marriage smoothing over difficulties between her husband and her family and often, his colleagues (Strehlow, J 2004, 2012).

Maps

My finger traces the line snaking
to the Centre,
the map, a pattern of unfamiliar marks
across vast spaces.
‘Where will we live?’ I ask Ted.

He points at strange names,
his finger rests on dots
on the yellowed paper.
‘Here or here,
there is much work to be done.’

My hands shake
but his strength,
his belief
steadies me.

Bertha was struck by the work Ted was doing in Central Australia when he showed her some of his diaries. She said: ‘I was fascinated. I learnt from Ted’s diaries the hardships he had often had to endure to perform his work. I began to see him…as a man of courage and compassion, with a great depth of understanding of, and love for, his Aboriginal friends’ (quoted in Hill 2003, p. 230). Bertha’s unswerving commitment to Ted and his work from the start of their relationship made it possible for him to carry out his research in Central Australia for extended periods of time (Crawley 1986, p. 107).
I have lived my life
perched at the edge
of brown peninsulas
that push like arrows into
the still waters of the gulf
and the Southern Ocean,
where the falling sun
drops orange into western seas.

Where the green hills of Adelaide
lean away from
city streets,
the pale stone of churches,
reminders of the enduring Empire.

I am leaving,
my back to straight streets
and cold hills.
Walking from my father’s door
with the sureness of youth
not yet understanding doubt,
knowing there is
nothing I will recognise
in the desert.

*Bertha and Ted were married in December 1935 following a whirlwind courtship and a relationship often carried out at long distances. Bertha worked as an English teacher at a girls' school in Adelaide until the wedding and Ted had been in Central Australia on a research trip, so their plans, both for the wedding and for their new life together in Central Australia, were made in the many letters they wrote back and forth to each other in the months prior to the wedding (Strehlow, B 1935 Letters to Ted, Strehlow Research Centre). Three weeks after their wedding they were on a train travelling to Central Australia.*
I remember one day after church
the minister took me aside:
‘There might be some difficulties,’ he said.
I’m startled
and it must have shown.

‘Of faith…’ He reddened,
‘but at least he’s a Protestant,
a Catholic would have been just too difficult.’

‘Sorry, do you mean because he’s a Lutheran?’
‘Yes, and from missionary stock…German
they look at things…differently,
there’s all that work with the blacks…’

Through the sun-filled window,
the green of the elm
caught the light,
and I just waited
for the interview to be over.

Bertha was from a well-established Anglican family and, although not wealthy, they were part of the Adelaide establishment. Ted, being from a German Lutheran missionary background, was not seen as a suitable match for Bertha (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 3). Bertha and Ted’s youngest son, John Strehlow, has written extensively on the complications and contradictions of his parent’s marriage – particularly the ideological differences in their conflicting backgrounds which arose in their relationship in regard to their social, economic and theological attitudes (Strehlow, J 2004 & 2011). Indeed, it was these differences Ted used against Bertha in 1968 when he was justifying his desertion of her. He implied that ‘…his German and Lutheran background was…completely irksome to her’ (in Hill 2003, p. 660).
The train

The sea pulls away from me, 
a vast retreating tide 
as the train grinds north, 
climbing the map 
into heat.

The towns grow smaller, 
until they are little more than 
a sprinkling of people 
huddled at the rail sidings. 
As far as the eye can see – 
red rocks dot 
the flat plains.

The windows jam with dust, 
crawl with flies 
my throat clots with hot air,

but my new husband and I 
gaze out the clouded window, 
hold hands, 
and when no one looks 
he kisses me.

In 1936 the train journey from Adelaide to Alice Springs took two days. Bertha and Ted were travelling in the height of summer and Bertha found the journey unpleasant: 'It was hot and sticky and nearing Alice Springs the train ran into a massive dust-storm. I never believed until then that such climatic conditions existed in Australia…I soaked some hand towels and poked them into the window frames to keep out the dust, but it was useless' (McNally 1981, p. 44). The drought in Central Australia throughout the 1920s and 1930s created massive dust storms across the area (Powell 2009, p. 131; Canberra Times article 24 September 1930). Despite the discomfort, Bertha’s attitude remained positive and she displayed intense interest in the world around her.
Alice Springs
18th February 1936

The town is one street.
Fences pushed into red sand
Whites in houses,
natives in reserves.
I step in dirt.

At the hostel,
the nursing sisters
make tea
and gossip.
The most exciting news –
Olive Pink is back in town
for a truck, a driver and provisions.
Her next plan to
live out bush in the north-west,
study the Warlpiri.
Ted stomps, furious
and I change the subject.

By the next day we are gone –
our bags caked in dust
in the back of the mission truck.

When Bertha arrived in Alice Springs there were fewer than 900 white people living there. Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to stay in the town and were kept at the Telegraph Station 10 kilometres to the north (Powell 2009, p. 129). Bertha and Ted met the nursing sisters at the Australian Inland Mission hostel and they stayed with friends of Ted’s to get provisions, before the four-hour drive to Hermannsburg Mission, 120 kilometres west of Alice Springs (McNally 1981, p. 44; Strehlow, B 1955 letter to Ted 24 September; Strehlow TGH 1936 Field Diary XI). The activities of the anthropologist Olive Pink had antagonised Ted for years, since they first met in 1932 at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science Conference (ANZAAS) where she openly criticised the Aboriginal converts at Hermannsburg mission, saying they were stealing sacred tjuringa [sacred stones] to sell to the missionaries (Marcus 2005, p. 65).
To Father
from Hermannsburg

My first view of the mission
was through a blanket of dust.
The storm lasted for days.
Kind missionaries gave us a home
to stay in.
Black helpers fed us,
served tea in the parlour,
fine china on lace cloths.
The older black women
are still called girls.

The missionaries
spoke highly of Ted’s parents,
their many years of work here.

We felt the suspicion
from some in Alice Springs,
but here, we are at home in Ted’s birth place
this strange Lutheran Aranda world
feels like Ted’s true home.

At Pastor Albrecht’s
the dinner discussion ran in circles;
is it more important to save souls
than to write down
language?
Can you do one without the other?

Ted does love to hold the floor,
and there really is nothing he doesn’t know
about this place.
Later in our room
Ted paced the stone floor,
angry as he heard
of more mistreatment of the Aranda,
the latest shootings,
the deaths.
People are only safe
on the Mission.

We are leaving soon
on the trek –
Ted has marked the route
on the map,
many miles west and south of here.
We’ll take camels
and some black helpers.

The mail is not reliable.
You won’t get this until we are
in deep desert.
I think of you often
Your daughter,

Bertha.
Hermannsburg 1936

Bertha was a prolific letter writer and communicated with her father in Adelaide regularly (Bertha Strehlow file, Strehlow Research Centre). Pastor Albrecht and his wife Minna welcomed Bertha and Ted to Hermannsburg and provided them with a place to live, as well as two Aboriginal women to help Bertha in the house (Strehlow TGH 1936). The many references to shootings by police and settlers caused Ted a great deal of stress and he was pleased to be able to apply for the position of Patrol Officer when it was created in early 1936. At the time he wrote: ‘I should be very glad indeed if I could get a position which would enable me to put my life at the service of the interests of the natives of my old home’ (ibid.). Despite differences in their upbringings, the importance of Christian service to others was a common belief for them both and Bertha supported Ted’s desire to stay and work in Central Australia.
Panic

I wake in black darkness
and rising panic,
no street lights to puncture the dark.
I wait for my sleeping
brain to clear –
to wake
to the moment
of remembering
where I am.

The journey to Central Australia was Bertha’s first major journey away from Prospect in Adelaide, where she had lived all her life. Although she was faced with many new situations, she wrote about them as ‘a great adventure’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 9). Living in Hermannsburg, Bertha was experiencing one of the oldest white settlements in Central Australia. It had been established in June 1877 on the banks of the Finke River, west of Alice Springs. The buildings were initially constructed from local timber and thatch, and over time tin was added to the roof and walls (Harris 1990, p. 390). When Bertha arrived the country was still suffering the effects of a long drought and being mid summer it was extremely hot. The buildings had stone floors but were very uncomfortable, as noted many years earlier by Bertha’s mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow: ‘the rooms were very hot in summer…because the cool night air could not blow through’ (Strehlow, J 2011, p. 543).
Heat

In the dark and stillness of the night
when the buzz seems to have gone from his head,
when he has settled,
we find each other
we are one: hands, faces
given up to the heat.

The early years of the marriage appear to have been very happy and content. A passage described in Hill (2003), reveals the happiness experienced during their time in Hermannsburg: ‘They went walking along the Finke, one day going as far as the bend it takes towards Palm Valley, and on another glorious day they strolled upstream…’ (ibid., p. 238). There was genuine companionship and a sense of adventure expressed in their writings of this time (Strehlow, B 1945; Strehlow TGH 1936, p. 40).
Trek

‘This trek across country
it may take many months,’
Ted grins as he tells me.

He is a dusty man,
a squat-by-the-campfire man
his clothes creased with dirt,
boots moulded to his feet.
The thought of travel brings him joy,
our lumpy bed at the mission
not rough enough for him.

Bertha was able to place her trust in Ted’s abilities as a competent bushman. She writes in a paper published many years after the trek, ‘Months before coming to Central Australia, I knew that once here I should spend a year either touring with my husband with the camel team or living in a tent’ (1940, p. 9). Ted was very familiar with the country as he had spent many months in Central Australia in 1932, 1933–34 and again in 1935, completing his anthropological research. He travelled over 7000 miles [11000 kilometers] by camel, often only in the company of his long time Aboriginal friend and camel handler Tom Ljonga (Hill 2003, pp. 145–53; Henson 1992, p. 75).
Camels

Animals from picture books
stand as tall as the house.

I’m not frightened at first
I don’t know
what to be frightened of

but they spit and snort
and bellow
and smell of something uncivilised.

Over time I will grow to love them –
when they carry me across
deserts –
saving me.

I am not easily frightened
and I feel Ted gaze on me.

The locals are watching me too,
all eyes on the new bride.

So I smile,
my hand in the thick fur
I make myself enjoy the company
of these creatures.

While preparing for the trek at Hermannsburg, Bertha is exposed to camels for the first time. She says of that experience, ‘Burney, my husband’s lead camel was the first of the team to be introduced to me, and…I imagined that we should become friends at first sight. However, Burney groaned so horribly when I offered to stroke his head that I was unmoved by any emotion except fear’ (Strehlow, B 1940, p. 9).
Photographs

My husband is one for photographs. 
He has hundreds in boxes, 
and more sent off 
to this university and that. 
People think 
that Aboriginal people are disappearing, 
he is documenting a fading world.

I know he fears for his old childhood friends 
he wants to save them from the winds of change
that sweep the desert.

His photographs 
hold onto an ancient world 
and his writings, his maps. 
Is he wasting his time, 
will the people be gone?

I ask him, 
will writing their words 
help them move into this world, 
this different civilisation?

Unlike the commonly held belief that ‘…the “full-bloods” were expected to become extinct through the operation of “natural” evolutionary forces…’(Haebich 2001, p. 18), the work Ted was involved in as a Patrol Officer demonstrated he was opposed to this view. His belief in the role and importance of Aboriginal people in the development of Australia reflects that of his parents who were missionaries at Hermannsburg for 22 years. Bertha was exposed to these policies, and she was critical of the racist and colonial views of the period that assumed the demise of Aboriginal people (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 47; Strehlow, J 2012).
Music

I know his fingers are itching for music, so when he finds the old organ in the sitting room of his childhood house, we hear his talent all over the Mission. It is the organ his father paid £5 for in 1896, yellowed keys and stained wood, the sound is still joyful, as he settles into the rhythm of the music.

Ted’s missionary father, Carl Strehlow, bought an organ in 1896 for his wife Frieda. It is this organ that Ted learnt to play as a child at Hermannsburg (Henson 1992, p.75). Bertha sees her husband in a different light being back in the place of his birth where he is able to share with her his love of music on the old organ. Bertha was a skilled soprano and appeared in recitals in the Adelaide Town Hall while she was still at university. As a couple, they had a mutual love of music and Ted would often accompany Bertha as she sang (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 4; Wall 2008, p. 1). Bertha’s daughter writes of her mother’s love of music, ‘As Bertha grew older she declined invitations to sing publicly but began to learn the recorder, and… joined a small recorder group’ (Crawley 1986, p. 37).
The gramophone

May 1936

The music moves against the canvas.
I am dancing,
my skirt could be silk
and my shoes
fine sandals.

He holds me, murmurs in my ear.
I try and remember
what it was he said,
to make me leave my green hills –
my parents.

He spoke in coloured dreams
that turned my head –
stories of nomads and deserts.

Spoke in a language that
rose and fell –
an ancient music.

It could have been Africa
we were coming to,
a more different world
I couldn’t imagine.

The gramophone
is a link
to my old life,
and here I dance with him –
my feet in thick shoes,
stepping lightly
through the dust.

Drawn together by music and the strange wonder of their life together in the desert, Bertha and Ted would dance together in the privacy of the tent they lived in for a time at Hermannsburg after they had to move out of the mission house. ‘They also during the 30s liked the blues and used to dance to records from their collection while in the tent…’ (Hill 2003, p. 230). Music served as a reflection for Bertha as she acknowledged her new life with Ted in Central Australia.
Camel boxes

The clink of metal
comes to me through
the open window
I follow the sound to the forge
to Ted –
blackened with soot
his face red in the heat.

He grins, holds up hot metal
in gloved hands, ‘These are
for the camel boxes.’
‘Oh good,’ I say,
hoping he will explain later.

After days of hammering and painting
the finished products are very handsome:
green timber boxes
in metal frames
to strap to each side of our camels.

I understand now –
the camels and their strength
are our lifeline.

In a 1940 article about the first part of the trek from Hermannsburg to Macumba Station in South Australia, Bertha writes lyrically about the preparations. Anticipating the trek to take seven to ten weeks, the camel boxes made by Ted were to contain all the food they needed. Bertha said, ‘…that meant taking along large supplies of flour, tea, sugar, meat and tinned foods and we had to try and remember all our requirements, because there would be no opportunity to buy extras from the station properties as we went along’ (Strehlow, B 1945, pp. 31–2). The quote ‘…to me through the open window…’ is from ‘Through Central Australia’ (Strehlow, B 1940, p. 9).
Gone

He is ever keen to be gone;
eager for his feet to be
moving as fast as his brain,
his mouth,
and his pen.

The camels are much too slow
but they are all we have.
Some days he will walk ahead of them,
striding off into the distance.
We come up behind
our slow lope the wrong rhythm for him.

There were frustrating delays for Bertha and Ted in getting away from Hermannsburg in the winter of 1936 because they were waiting for more camels to arrive from Alice Springs. Ted wrote that he had hoped to leave in June and said in his diary: ‘We have overstayed our welcome [at Hermannsburg], my wife cried in bed last night. She is weary and so am I’ (Field diary II 1936–37, p. 10). They finally departed from Hermannsburg on 5 June 1936 and travelled along the Finke River south towards a place called Irbmangkara [Running Waters], an area of the country Bertha found entrancing (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 32).
Chapter 2

Walking with camels
The eye of a needle

The camels stride –
a fine string  
through the trees.
Cliffs rise red  
over the gap  
and the line of camels,  
thread themselves through  
one, two, three  
until they are gone.

Voices echo  
from inside  
the gap:  
Aranda men calling  
camel commands  
in Arabic –  
the rocks speak  
as clouds lick at the cliff tops.

The camels tread  
with ease  
through the country,  
and I am reminded  
strangely,  
of rich men and the eye of a needle.

Bertha wrote a great deal about the camels she travelled with across the desert, and as she got to know them wrote with increasing affection. ‘…a fine string through the trees’ is from her article ‘Through Central Australia’ (1940, p. 10). Cars and trucks were being used to explore Central Australia by 1936 but camels were still used to get into more inaccessible country (Barker 1995, p. 129).
Rain

The day darkens, turns to rain.
We walk in fine mist,
the sand deepened to blood red,
until we are wet through.

The rain and cold weather impacted significantly on the party as they were exposed to the elements daily. Both Ted and Bertha discuss this regularly throughout their writings (Strehlow, TGH 1936 Field Diary 26 July, p. 21). Bertha writes in a letter to her mother-in-law, ‘The very first night it rained and I had to attend to things at the fire with a bag over my head, while Ted and the boys covered up the camel boxes with the big tent so that they were protected and we had a shelter’ (1936, p. 1). From early in the journey, Bertha helped with the cooking while Ted and their three Aboriginal camel handlers – George, Tom Longa and Witchetty – cared for the eleven camels.
By a kerosene lamp late into the night,
we read poetry.
My husband’s favourite:
TS Eliot.

*Shape without form, shade without colour
Paralysed force, gesture without motion*¹

We read of the destruction of the world
as the sky fades in streaks of red
and the bleeding clouds
follow the line of the curved horizon.

The end of the world
feels far from here;
a breeze blows in from the west,
stars pull themselves through,
and the white slither moon
falls into the darkening earth.

We read aloud –
him, then me.
I want to read words of love,
but his poetry fills the air
with its threats of hollow men
marching through death dreams.

I shudder in the emptiness,

wonder if this is how God sees us:

two people in a vast desert,

our words becoming the wind

as we speak

into the voiceless night.

The journey initially took them through remarkable country. Bertha writes: ‘Here and there, we passed beautiful waterholes, crossed running streams over stepping stones, and once came upon an amphitheater studded with trees and overhung by giant rock walls, making a retreat as lovely as a walled in garden’ (1940, p. 11). At night they read poetry to each other, one of these was Ted’s favourite poem: ‘The Hollow Men’ (Eliot 1954, pp. 67–9).
The silence

This dark night
desert air reaches
beyond the humanness
of this place.

It is an aching silence
that pulses
with expectation and destruction.

All our walking
in ‘undiscovered country’
becomes discovery of
emptiness,
of silence.

Midnight thinking is black
and as the tent walls
flex and stretch
I wish I was somewhere else –
the sea perhaps.

At the turn of the 19th century and into the early decades of the 20th century, Central Australia was seen as the last frontier, ripe for exploitation by pastoralists and miners. There was intense wrangling between anthropologists, explorers, missionaries and governments around the management of Aboriginal people as their lives were impacted on by the ‘development’ of the Centre (Powell 2009). This poem, then, is a reflection for Bertha who is experiencing the complexities of Central Australia for the first time in a very exposed way by travelling through the country.
Hoppity

Ted’s red face
appears over the sand
that piles up as he digs,

his arm disappearing into creek sand.
‘There!’ he says. ‘I’ve found water!’

I take the joey to him so it can drink
but it turns from Ted,
thin arms clawing the air
as it hops its way back to me.

Grains of mica stick to Ted’s face,
glint in the light,

he drops in the sand
his head in his hands,

the rejection of this small creature
fills him with despair.

In Hermannsburg Ted gave Bertha a joey as a pet and they took it with them on the trek. It proved to be a nuisance, running under the camel’s legs, making them shy. They ended up leaving the joey at Horseshoe Bend station (Hill 2003, p. 239). According to Bertha’s son John, Ted loved the joey and would get upset whenever it ran away from him to get back to Bertha (J Strehlow pers. comm. 26 June 2013).
The ghosts at Horseshoe Bend

The cold sets
in our bones
and even the natives can’t stand it.

I get down from the camel
to walk out of the wind.

By the time we stop
the wind has dropped
and we sit at the campfire
warming in silence,
just the bells of the camels
calling from across the creek.

A long night of cold
in the riverbed
and at daybreak
the water in the
billy is ice.

The cliffs near Horseshoe Bend
glow red in the morning,
frowning at us.

We pack, move on
the wind
pushing at our back
again.
The area near Horseshoe Bend on the Finke River has great spiritual significance to the Aranda people and Bertha wrote of this briefly in her 1945 article. However, her writing more frequently focused on the immediate topic of the weather which had a daily impact on the travellers: ‘It was difficult to make headway against the force of the wind, and clouds gathered overhead, obscuring the sun.’ (1945, p. 33). The challenging aspects of the bleak weather on the trek was doubly felt because of the events surrounding the death at the same location of Ted’s father Carl Strehlow 14 years earlier in 1922, when Ted was just 14 years old (Strehlow, TGH 1969).
Alone with the language

At the campfire,
the only woman

the only one growing a child,
the only one who hears
a new language
every passing day.

No one understands me
in the silences
of the bush,
with no one to talk to
and no one who will listen.

Bertha was the only woman on the trek and experienced an extreme sense of isolation, a contrast to her time at Hermannsburg where, even though she didn’t speak Aranda or German, she was around women every day. The lack of language could be overcome by the daily domestic routines of the mission and the household, but on the trek she only had Ted to talk to. In letters to her father and stepmother, she writes of enjoying the company of various station women who made her welcome and showed her great kindness (Strehlow, B 1936). She wrote of the companionship she experienced when she and Ted visited Charlotte Waters [324 kilometres south of Hermannsburg]: ‘When I first saw it I thought it was the most desolate place I had ever set eyes on. But, after a few hours, I realised the people there really cared for each other more than I believed possible’ (McNally 1981, p. 47). Bertha found she was pregnant very early in the camel trek and became ill with morning sickness. There is no record of her talking to anyone about it.
Morning sick

I hadn’t told him,
but he knows when my breakfast
comes up morning after morning.
He talks about going back.
Is it safe
walking the desert
in this condition?
My hands go to my belly,
as if to cover the baby’s ears,
lest we frighten it.

I am growing accustomed
to the new being
that grows in me
making me as sick
as if I was at sea.

I don’t yet know
that it knows everything,
even my thoughts.

When Bertha found she was pregnant very early in the journey (probably not long after they left Hermannsburg) it caused both her and Ted concern instead of joy. Despite the fact that Bertha did not refer to her pregnancy in her writing, Ted wrote extensively about it in his diary. In one entry he wrote, ‘My wife and I felt very depressed today. We know now that we can expect an heir in due time if everything goes well. What are we to do? Shall we risk a camel trip for my wife? Her nausea is rather disturbing’ (Strehlow, TGH 1936). Throughout the journey Bertha’s pregnancy was always read through Ted’s eyes in his diaries.
Patterns

Footsore we begin to unpack
knowing
it will be hours before we can rest.

But the end of the day
has its calming patterns.

The men unpack the camels,
I gather branches,
start the fire
and ready the meal
for Ted to cook.

The routine of setting up camp was laborious and took several hours each day. When the camp was set up Ted cooked for everyone and distributed food to the Aboriginal men, a routine that controlled and conserved the food supplies. It was a routine that was established at Hermannsburg Mission by Ted’s father Carl Strehlow and continued by Pastor FW Albrecht when he took over the management of Hermannsburg Mission in 1926 (Henson 1992, p. 28; Edmond 2013, p. 107).
Ancient light

The sky poured with milk,
a crowd of stars⁴
silken cold held in
blue black at the horizon.

The air
alive with stars
that stream across
the darkening bowl.

Night after night
this ancient light,
a bedtime story
read in pictures.

After leaving Lyndavale Station in early August, the party travelled west for 100 kilometres towards Mt Connor, much of the time traversing 10 metre high sand dunes. They saw the Musgrove Ranges to the south, and the shape of Mt Connor on the horizon before them for many days before they reached it. When recording the slow movement across the country, Bertha often included passages describing the vegetation and landscape (1945, p. 37–8). On her return to Hermannsburg she wrote: ‘…our progress out to the Reserve was very slow 18 or 20 miles being the best that we could manage on most days’ (1936, p. 1).

Late afternoon

The late sun shines silver in the grass fields,
in the stretch of spinifex sprouting after rain.
It has the look of fertile country
but it’s not.

As the wind dips, the quiet whispers in my ears.
All the world is here
under the falling sun,
the country a gift of light and softening air.

I hear the sound of night being called in,
camels, kettles,
the fire coming to life,
the smell of evening smoke resting in the valley.

Evening cold lifts from the creek bed,
I tend to the fire, the cooking,
let the yellow light
touch my pale skin,
in the final warmth
of late afternoon.

The party travelled for around six hours each day, with the unpacking and packing up again the next day taking a great deal of time. It was a gruelling schedule that Ted mentioned frequently in his diaries (1936), but Bertha rarely mentioned this in the papers she wrote about the journey (1940 & 1945).
Rage

The mind of a man is a mystery to me;
Oh, I understand much,
the power of desire –
I am young yet
and understand passion still.

It is the solitary fight
against the universe
I don’t understand,
the rage against God and man
that separates
my husband from the rest of us.

I see him in my mind’s eye at his happiest
as a dot on the landscape by a small fire;
notebook in one hand, and pen in the other.

The physical and emotional support Bertha provided to Ted, which made his work recording Aboriginal stories and legends possible, really began on his journey. Her generous nature gave him the safety and space within the relationship to develop his research (Hill 2003, p. 230).
Mt Connor

At night the camp fire
burns to bright coals,
and the bush stillness
is marked only by
the curlew and mopoke.

George tells stories of demons
living in the west,
the country we are walking to.

He says they look like cats
they spring on travellers,
tear them to pieces.

All the people have gone
there is no one out there
but dead men’s bones
he says.

This is a ‘found poem’ from Bertha’s published essay ‘A camel trip to the Petermann Ranges across Central Australia’ (Strehlow, B 1945, pp. 39–40). George was one of the Aboriginal guides on the journey. He was a Pitjanjatjara man from the far south-western part of the Northern Territory, and the Mt Connor area (Atila) was at the border of his traditional country. Bertha and Ted recorded him as being happy to be there again. Layton explains that this feeling is something deeper than being happy to be home; rather it is a cultural experience of coming into country where specific songs and chants need to be sung that are linked to the dreaming stories at the site and the health of the country (1986, pp. 43–4).
Night falls cold

August 1936

The night falls cold again.
It has been two months now
I am long past the worry
of bush bathrooms –
it is all part of life.

Dingoes voice their strange howl,
sounding close, no matter the distance.
Creatures scratch the canvas
and the wind brushes the tent walls.

Ice coats the basin, the kettle,
and my swag
as the chill creeps in.

By August 1936, Bertha and Ted and their party had travelled south from Hermannsburg into South Australia near Oodnadatta and then back into the Northern Territory. Their trek now took them west towards the South West Native Reserve, to investigate an allegation of the shootings of 3 Aboriginal men near the Petermann Ranges (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 10). Bertha was ill on and off with morning sickness and had experienced some distressing episodes of pain and cramping which resulted in severe bleeding Ted recorded his distress and worry in his 1936 diary (p. 42).
Speaking country

*The way the country speaks to you*:
in the wind
the drift of smoke from the camp fire,
the dry leaves over sand,
the glow of the morning.

The country has a way of speaking,
of making the rest of the world drift away,
until it is only here
that matters.

---

The movement experienced while travelling across country has a rhythm all of its own. Being in remote areas can give a sense of time changing physically and spiritually with the isolation from the rest of the world resulting in everything else disappearing. For Bertha, this experience was embodied in the movement of the camels and the distances travelled through the landscape (Hill 2001, p. 93).

---

Chapter 3

Into the west –
the Petermann Ranges
Inland Sea

The Inland Sea
lies rotting.
Mile upon mile
of rock, stone.
The people gone,
lingering confused
at the distant shores.

*Bertha wrote extensively about the lack of water and game in the South West Native Reserve and the devastation of the country caused by the drought and the introduction of cattle into Central Australia. She said of the ruined country: 'People wonder why the aborigines refuse to stay in the reserves that they have been granted to them, but are they to be blamed if they wander out of the reserves and live, instead of staying there to die of starvation?' Much of Bertha's record of her journey was dominated by accounts of the degraded condition of the country (1945, p. 47).*
Haircutting at Piltadi

We have stopped, camels tethered; their bells echo about the bush like the memory of forest birds.

The weather being mild, we unpack; do the washing, and with all that we own in the world marking our place in the sand, we take turns at haircutting.

I do quite a style on Ted’s and later, tidy up the bits he missed of mine.

The peace stretches here, and we speak in whispers as we spread into the desert.

The trek arrived at Piltadi waterhole for the first time on 24 August 1936. They travelled further west looking for evidence of the possible shooting of the three young men but returned to Piltadi again because it was the only reliable water source (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 10). Bertha had been bleeding on and off for a week but in a letter to her mother-in-law she does not mention this. Rather, she speaks of practical things: ‘there we sat down for a week to rest ourselves and our camels and do our washing, haircutting and other odd jobs’ (Strehlow, B 1936, p. 2). The medical situation Bertha was probably suffering is called a ‘threatened miscarriage’. The constant travel would have contributed to her increasing ill health but it is difficult to know if she had ceased all travel at this stage if she would have recovered and been able to carry the child to term (Kitzinger 1982, p. 339).
Mt McCulloch

Today we saw a hill
in the shape of a fallen camel.
It lay restful on the plain,
but we shuddered as we walked by,
and didn’t look back
lest the idea attached itself to us too firmly.

My husband is looking for three men,
Witchetty saw their footprints yesterday
‘naked men’ as George calls them.
Today I keep camp as the men travel on quick camels
following their quarry.

But the men are fast,
lighting small fires to cook,
keep their firebrands alight
then moving on
their footprints, a travelling story.

The country grows as a map in Ted’s diary –
Piltadi, Mt Bowley, Piltadi again,
it is the last water for many days,
and hard to turn away from.

I cook for Ted
keep the fire friendly for me.
I know I am unwell,
and wait, uneasy.
He returns as the day ends
and as it turns to dark, he unrolls the swag,
I rest.
He straightens the camp
washes out our dishes,
makes bread, tinkers with the fire.

The setting sun throws shadows past the fallen camel hill –
another rise for Ted to mark on his map.
Tomorrow, he will search again,
for the running men.

Bertha was very unwell when they reached the Petermann Ranges, the end point of their journey west, where she could finally rest (see p.ix). Being in this location meant Ted had work to do and he commenced his investigation into the disappearance of three young Aboriginal men who had been missing since the reports of a shooting near Mt Bowley in the Petermann Ranges by the expedition searching for Lasseter (Adelaide Advertiser, 2 July 1936; Strehlow TGH, 1936–37 Diary 11, pp. 36–41). Ted reported in his diary, ‘Whether the story of the shooting tragedy is true or not, time will tell…’ (ibid., p. 35). Ted was juggling the pressure of his work and his concern for Bertha’s wellbeing. Bertha was silent throughout this.
Reading the sand

Ted is camped
down the creek-bed,
talking for hours
with those three old men
George found.

Ted asks about other white travellers.
Did they shoot your countrymen?
George translates and Ted waits,
Pitjanjatjara into Aranda,
back and forth.

The old men are trackers –
readers of the sand.
They know who has passed through their land:
what they ate and drank,
the direction they were heading,
where they might be now.
But the old men shake their heads,
their hands –
there’s no trace of the lost men,
not a footprint.

They talk nervously of spirits,
eyes flick at the waterhole,
worry in their voices,
speak of missing men in quick whispers.

Their fear spreads through us all
and I find myself glancing at
rocks crowding over the waterhole.
Bertha had to stay away from the discussions Ted was having with the Pitiŋaŋaṟa men: ‘After greeting [the men] in Aranda, Ted was invited to sit and talk. Bertha remained some distance away – as did Tom Ljonga and the trackers: this was ‘foreign’ country to them’ (McNally 1981, p. 51). Meeting these old men was an unexpected bonus as both Bertha and Ted regularly reported that the Southwest Native Reserve was empty of people, the results of colonisation impacting on Aboriginal populations through illness, pastoral demands imposing on hunting grounds and massacres. This contrasts to pre contact days where ‘…in spite of the wide open spaces, Aboriginal people in the desert were neither alone or subject to random movements, rather there was profound and purposeful movements influenced by the weather and seasons’ (Clarke 2003, p. 141; Layton 1986, pp. 456).
Kungkarangkalpa

travels of the Seven Sisters

George talks to me today
no longer shy.
But never do his eyes meet mine,
he stands beside me
and we look west.

Hands busy and with few words,
he explains the Seven Sisters –
the ancestors
who walked over the land
making the waterholes and the hills.

Because of the stories, (his hands tell me)
the people are firm on the ground.
They command the air with their song,
telling the stories of here –
in the shape of the mountains,
the run of sand on the riverbed,
a secret waterhole cut into rock.

My husband is busy
with the camel boxes and straps
and when he looks up,
George has returned to his work
gathering the camels,
he calls to them in Arabic
and the ring of bells follows him
through the mulga.

All day the camels pad
over the red dirt
taking us further west,
my mind stays on the Seven Sisters
and their striving over country.

Later, as shadows lengthen
and trail long behind us,
the wind in the desert oak
is a whisper like words from the past,
and I am sure I can feel the sisters still.

Bertha is likely to have read the story of the Seven Sisters when she edited Ted's work (Strehlow, J 2004; Strehlow TGH 1971). There are many versions of the Seven Sisters creation story from the different language groups in the south and west of Central Australia that explains the formation of the ‘mythopoetic landscape’ of the desert country in the south and west of the Northern Territory (James 2009, p. 13). The many forms of retelling (song, dance and oral) are examples of how when a story is told and retold appropriately to strangers it becomes a metaphor for the meeting of cultures. Layton writes: ‘Legends are not told in their full form at once: incidents are related when an occasion arises to visit the appropriate place and gradually more profound aspects of the narrative are revealed to give a deeper understanding of why the legends play so central a part in Aboriginal life within the region’ (1986 p. 5). For Bertha, this involved writing up the traditional stories told to Ted by a number of Aboriginal men who talked to him over a period of time (Strehlow, TGH 1936).
Camping east of Mt Philips

The flies are here today.
The bush buzzes with their whine.

The wind is cool at my back
but the sun burns if I stray out of the shade,
‘winter–summer’ days Ted calls them.
We are forever putting on jumpers
then pulling them off again.

In the still space
further talk becomes unnecessary.
We sit together in the buzz of quiet,
drink tea.

The crows call across the river
telling each other of our activities,
I feel sure they are laughing at us.
They wing away over country
we still have to trudge through.

Rippled clouds stretch
long white lines over the horizon,
in patterns like beach sand.

The crows return
take up residence in the gums above us.
We are new to the neighbourhood
so they check on us
their heads tilting with yellow eyes.

Budgerigars chatter on, invisible in the grey gums,
rocks at the waterhole glow red as the day ends,
and in the fading light blush brighter.

Something unseen
disturbs the budgerigars
they lift *en masse* to another tree,
chirrup in circling laughter.

He tells me I am different here,
calmer, less rushed.
I laugh, tell him there is not much to be done.
This must be what makes me thoughtful,
and I begin to see country:
like the hills to the south that look like a fallen camel;
he tells me this is a way
of letting the country in.
Even as my body drains
life away,
today is a good day.

I know he has always had this,
the country always being in him.
From the moment his Aranda mother
took him in her arms, spoke to him in her language.
From that moment he was forever part of here
in a way I never can be.

Ted had a very strong sense of identity with Central Australia and in particular with the Aranda; indeed, Ted’s biographer Hill (2003) wrote that Ted was convinced he was a lone voice speaking up for Aranda people. In Bertha, he had found an accepting and loving partner who believed in him and what he was doing. Her writings of this time demonstrate her ability to be open-minded and accepting of the situations she found herself in, fed by the love she felt for Ted (Strehlow, B 1936, 1940, 1945 & 1949; Hill 2003, p. 230; McNally 1981, pp. 43–4). Bertha was bleeding on and off each day and was very unwell; some days were better than others, this was a better day.
Mt Bowley

Our journey
ended
at Mt Bowley
near the Shaw River,
a fine broad creek bed,
and we passed close by
Winter’s Glen
where Lasseter
is buried

We had hoped
we might
have a baby next year

but
it is not to be,
not to be.

In a letter to her mother-in-law after the camel trek, Bertha briefly mentions the miscarriage but focuses on the spiritual aspect of the experience rather than the grave physical danger she was in (1936, p. 3). The complications of miscarrying at 12 weeks are haemorrhage and infection if the miscarriage was ‘incomplete’, and both situations can result in a medical emergency (Kitzinger 1982, pp. 339–40). Bertha was lucky to have survived but she and Ted felt very strongly that she had been spared by an act of God. The mention of Lasseter’s grave gives the reader a context. It is a mark on the map as a coded message, acknowledging that her child too was buried there (Strehlow, B 1945 p. 44). The ‘found poem’ is the closest I can find in Bertha’s writing to where she hints at her miscarriage and illness.
Nothing

The days pass
me, bleeding life.

I write to Father,
try a cheery letter:

    The country spreads vast,
    empty.

But the cramps get Ted’s attention
and his loving eyes crease
with concern.

    The waterholes are green, low, edges pushed in
    by nervous cattle. The other day I saw a calf,
    its thin flank shaking as it nudged the bones of its mother.

Ted tends to me, feeds me,
his hands almost tender.

    We have named the camels, each for its personality
    it’s like travelling with a group of children one day
    and grumpy old women the next.
    They calm us though; stride through the country as if
    it is theirs.

Ted’s eyes are better than any mirror,
and I say my prayers.

    Father, I am so lucky to have seen this country,
    so lucky to have your love,
I bleed life
and regret
nothing.

As Bertha was a prolific letter writer, it is logical that she wrote to her father in Adelaide of her experiences in the desert. But at the same time she was intensely private and was unlikely to have revealed the cause of her illness, instead discussing the landscape and the country about her. The poem imagines her external calmness in the form of a letter, a contrast to her internal struggle in the face of possible death. This quiet moment of reflection is expressed by artist Ruark Lewis: ‘...a poem on the page is like a window’ (2001), acknowledging her experiences, enabling her father to develop a picture of the desert.
Beauty

4th September 1936

Beauty is a young man
so filled with fear and passion
he breathes his secrets to me.

Here the desert sky
reaches beyond the heavens.
It presses down on us and
he speaks of loss –
of being utterly alone,
and we pray
that God will save us.

I feel calm – safe
we confess old secrets
our sins punished

we are here alone –
our baby gone now.

Her tiny, hardly formed body
buried by the tree
where I have cried myself empty.

And my stained
towels colour the waterhole pink
I watch him,
bent by the sand
as he washes them.
There is no one else.
Ted recorded the events of the night that they thought could be Bertha’s last. They prayed together and he wrote that they made confessions to each other. The couple told each other of their past sins and both felt greatly relieved afterwards, then Bertha’s cramping subsided somewhat (Strehlow TGH 1936, p. 46). Hill writes, ‘It was in this state of naked dependence…’ that they felt a new level of closeness with each other (2003, p. 243). Their Aboriginal helpers had gone east towards Mt Olga in search of water, their food supplies were very low and their situation is looking grim. Ted wrote, ‘She is reading our bible now’ (p. 46).
At the waterhole
8th September 1936

I will write to my mother-in-law,
tell her,
but for now I must go on,
get well, and look after my dear husband.

I started bleeding
weeks ago,
at first I thought it might just be the heat
and the long days of walking –
we covered thirty miles yesterday,
but I know now that the baby has gone.

I cried when I told my love,
he was sad, but sensible,
*We’ll have more.*
And I agreed, because I know we will,
but as I bleed and the strength goes out of me
I worry about what this means for the future.

Our native helpers seem
as awkward
as my husband.
They know there’s women’s business going on
And have camped far away from us.

How I miss being with women,
a mother would have washed my bloodied rags,
cared for me in that gentle way of women.

Ted is making a litter of sorts –
a stretcher for the side of the camel,
a frame to carry me back to civilisation.
It keeps him busy
and although he works quite nearby
I am alone with my loss.

I dreamt of the baby last night –
a girl, and in the dream, she was quite grown.
She was swimming in the waterhole
her skin gleamed.
She called for me to join her
but I just waved
and stayed sitting on the sandy banks.

The threat of death for Bertha was very real because of the extreme remoteness of their location and because there was no option of being rescued. Even if they had taken a radio, there was no facility available to bring Bertha back to Alice Springs. The statistics reveal that the rate of maternal deaths in the Northern Territory did not decline until after 1920 and even then remained twice as high as for the rest of the country (QLD Gov. 2009, p. 265).
If I speak from under the earth

I speak from under the earth, the desert a red beast over me. History is layers of time on my voice; broken sand, dust air and cloud blur. The sky pushes into me until the life I had before this moment dries up, gone on hot wind. I remember when I didn’t know the desert was owned; spoken for. I was young then – earnest. Travellers still stumble over, and in, call it empty, choose not to see beings in every rock, every hill. Can you see it? The shape of the mountains there – they say it’s the ancestors walking, making the stories. I know now that the people are sick – see that crying country! I hear them call. Cattle trample the waterhole – edges falling in and the camels afraid to reach their long necks to green water. Listen! The birds are silent at the rockhole, the dingo, thin like a hopeful shadow, presses soft steps on the ground, its body yellow as sand. The air waits; rising smoke folds in a white line from the creek bed. I wait also, my day follows the passing clouds, the sun. The shape of my body lying in the sand makes valleys for the colonies of ants. Mica specks shine on my skin: this is the moment I love, the desert warm on me; the day slow, I sleep. When I wake, the cold creeps through the sand from ground-water deep below. The night a black blanket I can’t find the edge of, the dingoes call loneliness in the dark; they cry like they are hurting and I shiver knowing people die here. The mopoke calls late and distant from across the hills. Can you feel it? I must speak from under the earth to be heard, with a voice no longer mine. The desert is its own animal, alone and desperate. Enough it snarls, barely glancing at me as it performs its night ritual. The stars save me, their distant glowing buzz a thick light like white paint splitting the sky. My night dreams wander; here I see the stories, the land maps that roll across the country, and it is a comfort.

The country opened up to Bertha and she could ‘see’ it as if for the first time. The experience at Pilta di had taken her into new depth of understanding of herself and the country she was in. The concept of understanding the country from the ‘inside’ is expressed by Anna Couani: ‘The map of the world is felt from the inside…/Reading with the fingers as though blind. Feeling it with the back, down the spine…/Flying low but fast across the land masses’ (Hampton & Llewellyn 1986, p. 198). Bertha’s experience was mirrored in the idea that she could see that Indigenous lands are ‘saturated with meaning’ (San Roque, Dowd & Tacey, 2011, p. 126)
The women

They step out of the dark,
their black
mixing with the night,
and we don't know they are
there until the firelight
picks up their eyes.

They are frightened;
of our camels, of us,
but they leave me
with herbs
to stop my bleeding.

Women’s lore
they hand to my husband;
I watch,
as if through fog.

The accounts of the Aboriginal women who assisted Bertha are documented by Wall (2008) and McNally (1981, p. 63). Neither Bertha nor Ted mentions this moment in their writings. The herb given to Bertha in a tea infusion was mostly likely the native desert shrub Eremophila longifolia which is found across Central Australia (Latz 1995, pp. 176–7). Called ‘tulypurpa’ in Pitjanjatjara, it is given to women following childbirth to help stop bleeding (Goddard 1992, p. 223). Before white people arrived in Central Australia the herb was administered by passing ‘smoking’ branches over the woman, but after the arrival of white people Aboriginal people used billies to boil water and this herb was made into an infusion and given as a drink (Latz 1995).
Skies and waterholes

The sky bloodied,
a reflection of the waterhole.
The crimson sky our only warning
and we take what God hands out.

I hold onto the journey
as an adventure:
that is what I will tell the children,
when I am old,
when they have grown,
when I survive.

I know people die out here;
I’ve read of the explorers
by the crystal lakes –
salt like ice,²
a white that never melts.

I fall in and out of death
my mind so full.
I thought I would be years older,
I thought I would have done more.
Have taught – sung more?
I sing so well.
But not now;
my voice
has gone into weeping.
Now black faces
stare at me.

² Knowledge of country as a continuum for Aboriginal people as demonstrated by ‘Ice Dreaming’, a painting by Charlie Tawawa (Tjarur) Tjungurrayi, painted at Papunya in the 1970s from stories passed down by word of mouth from the Ice Age some 30,000 years earlier (Bardon 2006, p. 78).
The women are here,
tall, black, thin,
so thin!
What do they eat
when there is no food in these lands?

From those who have nothing –
no clothes, no lizards hanging from the hairstring
at their waists,
no children,
no husbands, not here at least;
they give me herbs,
and it is from
their land that I am saved.

Reference to the women who gave Bertha herbs to stop the bleeding is scant. In a 1949 article (p. 33), she wrote: ‘On a trip I once took with my husband across the South-west Native Reserve we met a few natives near Mount Olga who could still be described as entirely primitive in their way of life.’ These could be the women who brought her herbs, as this is the area near where she miscarried. Another account by Wall (2008, p. 3) says: ‘They were in the outback, miles from anywhere. He [Ted] fashioned a…stretcher on his camel’s near side, lifted Bertha into it…and led the camel in the direction where he might find aboriginal help. The group he met was unknown to him but they understood his Aranda language, trusted him and were willing to help. The aboriginal women knew what to do and Bertha’s life was saved.’ Their knowledge was the link between life and death for Bertha, but the reality of how close they came to the other outcome, haunted Bertha and Ted every step back to Hermannsburg.
Flossie

Flossie is my favourite.
She knows my voice,
looks up when I am nearby,
and I’m sure her face
is softer than the others,
eyes warmer.

Now I lie in the stretcher
strapped to her side –
rock to and fro
with each step.

The bitter dung
in my nose,
hair, my skin.
The damp towel
over my face cools me
but the smell stays.

I close my eyes,
imagine I am comfortable,

for if we are ever to leave this place
she has to carry me out.

Ted constructed a stretcher from mulga and canvas to carry Bertha from Piltadi. She wrote: ‘The problem immediately arose of how we were to get home as I couldn’t possibly ride a camel and we couldn’t stay there indefinitely…Ted cut down 2 forked mulga branches and tied 3 long straight poles to them to form the seat and back. Then he covered these with hessian and put a board at the back for the headrest. It was strapped to the side of the camel like an ordinary load and an equal load was filled into the pack bags and hung on the other side…’ (1936, p. 3). In this stretcher, Bertha was carried for the 300 miles [480 kilometres] back to Hermannsburg Mission.
The Olgas

From first light we see them –
pink on the horizon,
their heads tilted down
leaning in
talking to themselves.

All day we travel,
and they grow
as we hope against hope
each red dune is the last.

But from the east a cold wind
splinters our clothes,
and the domes look like vanishing
into the plain of spinifex
before we reach them.

Bertha was very weak as the party travelled towards Mt Olga and she was carried on the side of a camel in a stretcher frame that Ted had made (1936, p. 3), but she gives nothing away: 'Mt Olga lay sixty miles from Piltadi, and we could see it for most of the way. It appeared as a blue shadow on the horizon at first – a shadow with many domes. As we drew closer the colour changed to rose pink and then to dark red, and the rocky mass appeared to form a cluster of gigantic boulders heaped together' (1945, p. 45).
The first white woman

Bertha Strehlow, on seeing Ayers Rock, September 1936

I should say something at this moment –
the immense wonder of it,
its ancient form reaching above the flat plains,
a solidness on the ground
curled like a giant animal
that has slept for a millennium.

As we come into its folds
the western sun is blocked,
but I am too sick to notice light fall
on red rock,
now orange, now mauve.

I pray for many sunsets in this place.
I will record them with eloquence,
but in this moment I am ill, tired,
and grateful for the clear waters
at the rock’s base,
an icy balm on my fevered lips,
I sleep safe in deep shadows.

Bertha had seen Ayers Rock from a distance a month earlier as she and Ted had travelled west towards the Petermanns; now she was coming into its folds. Many years later she wrote: ‘We found a quality of water on the southern side of the rock, and replenished our supplies at a pool which was icy cold because the sun’s rays could not reach over the high rock wall’ (1945, p. 46). Being at Ayers Rock was significant because the party could spend time at a reliable water source before the waterless journey of 190 miles [305 kilometers] north towards Palm Valley (1936, p. 4). Many parties of white explorers had passed by the Rock since Gosse had first recorded seeing it in his diary on 19 July 1873 (1973). All of the white travellers prior to Bertha were men.
Sound

A falling stone
rattles from the cliff
and me, alone at the waterhole
listening.
I must write the beauty onto the page,
but the pen is a dead weight
in my hand, and the book
is part of the ground.

I listen for his return;
I pray not to be alone
for long.
If I call, will he hear me?
But my strangled throat
twists in its tube.

I might die here,
for love, for beauty
and the moment would pass
so quietly.

The birds still at the water;
ants, lizards.
The moment gone –
soft, small,
a whisper
barely heard.

---

It is not without significance that Bertha spent some of her time recovering at the base of Uluru at Maggie Springs. This waterhole – now referred to by its Pitjanatjara name, Kupi Mutitjulu – is a sacred women’s place of healing and creation. It is part of the ‘ground journeys of the seven sisters’ (Isaacs 1984, p. 241). These are formation stories explaining the creation of the landscape, with different versions told to women and men, and others to strangers. For Bertha, this place was one of restoration and safety. Above the rockhole a series of curved pools sit high in the rock and black lines run down the red of the Rock showing the path of the water. The Rock curves around the waterhole like arms protecting it from the exposed face of the rock. It is reverent and holy and the quiet is profound (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 46).
Chapter 4

Six years in Jay Creek
Dear Mother

Hermannsburg
8th October 1936

We are back again at last, from our long trek out bush.
I suppose you have been anxiously waiting for news.

I am quite well again now, we felt always that God was watching us protecting us, Ted will write, but he is ill and can’t make this mail.

We have not told anyone else except my people about the nature of my illness. I know you will not mention it, because the nature of Ted’s position will bring about plenty of unfriendliness towards us and we don’t want to give people the opportunity to criticise us.
We want to keep our affair private I know you will understand.

With much love from
Bertha Strehlow
Found poem taken from a letter Bertha wrote to her mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow in Germany after she and Ted arrived back in Hermannsburg on 25 September 1936. She wrote: ‘I am quite well and have been since about a fortnight after the event. Neither of us regrets it…’ She wrote with warmth and was positive throughout the letter as she focused on the spiritual experience they had and played down the life-threatening experience she had faced in the desert (1936, p. 4).
The tent

The thin tent wall –
more a metaphor for a home
than an actual home.

Creatures visit,
they don’t understand metaphors.
We block up holes and gaps
but ants and lizards seem to
have the ability to move through them,
and this morning I shuddered to see
the curved tracks
of a snake beside my bed.

Bertha and Ted lived in a tent for two years while they waited for their house to be built, they called it ‘their island’. Tired of waiting, Ted started making the bricks himself with help from Aboriginal workers at Jay Creek (Hill 2003, p. 322). Biographers Barbara Wall (2008) and Ward McNally (1981) cite Bertha’s fear of snakes. There was good reason, as Ted wrote in an entry in his journal: ‘More snake tracks were visible in our tent this morning’ (Strehlow, TGH 1936).
Journals

Each day he writes,
until
boxes line our tent.
Some days it’s all he does,
there’s letters to the Administrator,
the mission
then his diary.

I laugh and tell him
one day
he will have
a library built in his honour
to keep them all.

In 1991, 50 years after Bertha’s time in Central Australia, the Strehlow Research Centre was opened in Alice Springs. It was a purpose-built facility to house the 15 kilometres of movie film, 7,000 slides, thousands of pages of genealogical records, audio recordings, letters, 42 field diaries and over 700 sacred objects that Ted had collected over his many years in the field (Hill 2003, p. 20). Despite the controversy surrounding the amount the government of the time paid to purchase the Strehlow Collection from Ted’s second wife Kathleen, there is indeed a library to hold his work (Smith 2009).
Outhouse

My journey to the outhouse –
a hazardous joy
the cold an aching.
I move in
quiet dark,
torch light waving
as even lizards
sleep.

And each night I
remember to look up,
for above me the
world opens.

Back in bed
my face cold on
Ted’s warmth,
I can’t help
my smile, wide
in the dark.

*Bertha’s ability to make do meant she coped well with the conditions and situations she found herself in. Ted’s biographer writes: ‘Bertha quickly showed herself to be a most unexpected type of city-girl cheerfully setting up house under canvas… “it was adventurous, and for most of the time she enjoyed it”’ (McNally 1981, p. 56).*
The horses at Jay Creek

I hear them in the night
stamping the ground
at my tent.
They trip on ropes
in the dark
and the tent slackens.

Sleek and lean
reflecting doubles
of themselves
in the waterhole at dusk.
The whole country
is copied golden
in thick toffee,
until ripples of their
drinking
roll like echoes
over and over
across the water.

Feral horses became prevalent in Central Australia with the arrival of white settlers and explorers but weren’t as well suited as camels in the desert landscape. They were used predominately in the cattle industry for the mustering and movement of cattle, but many escaped and over time adapted to the desert conditions (Barker 1995, p. 129). They roamed the Jay Creek Native Reserve, visiting waterholes at dusk.
Dream language

The language felt in the rocks,  
on the air through grey leaves.

A land language I hear on my skin  
as it moves like a veil over my face.

Sound that touches under skin  
like water seeping through sand,

that birds know before it is sound.  
A scent cushioned on wind, on currents over hills,

in cloud,  
in rain when it finds itself falling.

The flick of a bird’s wing,  
dust that falls as it turns.

And light, ragged on the horizon  
brushed orange in the mountain’s profile,

a misted rainbow of colour  
fading to dark, with dotted stars –

lanterns to guard the cold night.  
All sound, like a long held note.

The language fades from my ears,  
but echoes loud in the land.

I move through rock,  
creep in the dark, watch the night animals come.
The dark a type of home,
a tranquil breath

of giving in,
giving up, giving over.

A small moment
where all others wash off
into dreams
and I stop worrying for the first time.

Historian Paul Carter examines the association between ‘travelling and dreaming’ as expressed by 20th century explorers in Central Australia, in particular in the writing of Ernest Giles who named the Petermann Ranges. Bertha’s dream state is explored by investigating the parallels in this imagined dream of Bertha’s with Giles’ writing: ‘Darkness began to creep over this solitary place…I coiled myself up under a bush and fell into one of those extraordinary waking dreams which occasionally descend upon imaginative mortals when we know that we are alive, and yet we think we are dead…At such a time the imagination can revel only in the marvelous, (sic) the mysterious, and the mythical.’ In his discussion of Giles’ writing Carter states: ‘[with this reverie] the writer seeks to persuade us of the universality of his (sic) experience. Such transcendent moments are part of the explorer’s credentials. They are an indispensable element, if the biography is to be complete’ (Carter 1987, pp. 84–5).
Burning

He comes in breathless
speaking in statements –
it seems his sponsor has pulled out
how will he find another?
He paces up and down in the tent – swearing.
Hush, I say, think of those around.

For a moment he has violence in his eyes,
the passion of indignation
burning out of them.

I’m sure we’ll find another, I say,
knowing full well he has
burnt most bridges.

The pacing starts again:
red faced,
fists tight balls at his side.

He is like a moth
throwing himself
over and over
against the flame
waiting to catch fire.

The drought conditions that caused so much worry for Bertha and Ted in 1936 still prevailed. Ted was frustrated that his recommendations for a food/ration depot in the South West Native Reserve to be established to prevent starvation among the Pitjanatjara people and to stop them from leaving the area were ignored. He wrote: ‘The southern part, viz the Petermann Ranges is rapidly approaching the same degree of desolation [as in 1936]. In the report I furnished three years ago the danger of such an evacuation of the Reserve was pointed out, and the establishment of a ration depot suggested as an immediate remedy to relieve the situation’ (Strehlow TGH 1939, pp. 15–8). Bertha spent much of her time, in this instance and on many other occasions, calming Ted and helping him to tone down his responses to the government officials (Strehlow, J 2004).
Static air
and we drive,

the hills open
to a brown valley,
and a windmill creaking through
its cycle, the lumbering roll
drags a pole and water from
the ground, slime
troughs, the only green life.
Cattle yards are powder,
pressed by a thousand hooves.
Grey and pink
galahs wheel in, crowding the air.

We pull up
let the dust wave pass
get out and walk,
shading our eyes against the sun.

And outside the car, in the silence,
is the sound of distance.

Shifting dirt
and heat
our travelling companions.

The drought that Bertha experienced was part of a long-term weather pattern recorded by white explorers as 1890–91, 1915–17, 1931–39 (Layton 1986, p. 34). In later years there was greater acceptance and understanding of the weather patterns in the area where drought was seen as more the norm. As described by Latz: ‘On the whole, drought years are more frequent than exceptionally good years’ (1995, p. 3). In 1941 Ted was supplied with a car to assist with his travel in the area and Bertha would often accompany him on these trips (Letter from VJ White Director for Native Affairs, 17 April 1941).
Fire

The day started well;
bright and clear across the valley.
Then, a wind from the west,
and the smudge of smoke stain
clouded the day.
Time spent in worry,
and, at its end, we watch the
sunset spread fire across the sky.
In the morning the red
sunrise –
a warning for distant shepherds.

Daily life at Jay Creek was impacted on regularly by the elements, a constant worry for the white settlers. Aboriginal people used fire to hunt and to regenerate plant life, and although this practice continued (Isaacs 1987, p. 4; Latz 1995, pp. 29–43) traditional land-management techniques were not well understood by white settlers and administrators who worked to exercise control not only over the lives of Aboriginal people but also over the environment. Jay Creek ran herds of goats as a way of creating employment for the Aboriginal residents and as a form of income for the settlement (Hill 2003, p. 304).
Small things

This day, the silence rests in small things:
the scratch of a leaf on rock,
the beat of air on bird wings,
the pull of the wind.
The lifting sky,
and the open drift of clouds.

The straight line of ants’ trails
on sand
swept clean by constant traffic,

and at the edge of the waterhole,
the lap of tiny waves,
like the sound of lips
opening to a smile.

The movement of canvas
that is somehow a sound even
on the stillest of days.

Distant voices,
the possibility of a car,
the call of children,
and my empty, weeping womb,
silence in the
smallest of things.
Bertha had a further three miscarriages after her trek across the desert. Each time she was very ill. Reference to a car passing by on the way to Stanley Chasm on 13 June 1937, following Bertha’s second miscarriage on Saturday 29 May, is found in Ted’s diaries (1937). Ted regularly recorded Bertha’s physical condition: ‘Dr. Riley visited [from Alice Springs] in Don Thomas’ car’ and on 11 June, Bertha ‘walked around the camp’ and ‘sat up for 6 hours’. On another day Ted writes that Bertha ‘sat in the garden and had her first meal’ and ‘a car passed by on the way to Stanley Chasm’ (TGH Strehlow 1937 Personal diary No. 3, SRC). The loss of a child, especially a miscarriage, was difficult to talk about without fault being levelled at the woman, as was implied by Bertha herself in her letter to her mother-in-law (1936). This work reflects a tradition of eulogy in poetry as explored by poets Deb Westbury: ‘...a name he didn’t expect, even then, to live all the way into.’ (2002, p. 63), and Sian Hughes: ‘...you don’t need a bottle, cuddle, special rabbit, teddy, bit of cloth, You don’t even need to close your eyes. They were born that way, sealed shut...’ (2009, p. 37). Bertha appears not to have spoken or written about her ill health from her debilitating miscarriages, nor of the impact this would have had on her marriage.
I
There is mourning in the camp.
Awake,
I listen to the rise and fall of weeping,
to the rhythm.

Later, I will tend to the wounds
made from rocks and sticks.
Now I weep in silence
for only those closest
can cry loudest.

II
The missionaries asked the people not to wail,
being German they were very strict about this.
All life events should be carried out as quietly,
as respectfully as possible.
Does quiet mean respect in German?

III
The women are singing
a Lutheran hymn in Aranda,
the lift of harmonies
not unlike weeping.

IV
At the rockhole
I slip from my clothes
alone,
I sing like I’m the only one in church
and my voice echoes back to me
from the rocks
Leni Shilton
Giving voice to silence

clear and loud.

V
Birds call to the coming rain
their song, a warning;
I take the washing in,
tighten the tent against leaks
and the gathering clouds.

Sharing a title with TGH Strehlow’s major work Songs of Central Australia published in 1971 (Allen & Unwin), this poem recognises the typing and editing which Bertha did over the six years of living in Jay Creek Native Reserve and also in the years that followed in Adelaide. Much of the early editing of this book occurred while she lived in the tent at Jay Creek and she was never acknowledged for this work. It was a small community and there was a tight control over the lives of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who lived at Jay Creek where everyone knew everyone else’s business (Strehlow TGH, 1937, p. 25).
Walking east

The old woman from the camp
told me
which way to go:

*Back over the hills*  
*and into the valley*  
*before the ranges* –  
*you mustn’t go*

She says all this with  
a point  
of her finger  
a flick of the wrist.  
So I head east  
along the road,  
talcum powder dust  
coating my shoes.

Above, an eagle floats in wide arcs  
its shadow shape  
frozen still  
against the sky,

and at the road’s edge  
golden spiral flowers  
drip with honey,  
and glisten green  
after the rain.

As I walk, red dust clouds bloom,  
lifted from a car on the horizon.  
Off the road
hills dip
like the small curves
of a woman’s back.
Orange grasshoppers
fly from the spinifex
at each step.

As the sun shifts in the sky,
falling to the west,
the shadows stretch long
from the hills.

I try to imagine this country
in ten, fifteen, twenty years,
and fear only the jagged
spine of the mountain range
and the pattern of the travelling sun
will remain the same.

Sign languages were in daily use in the Arandic communities of Central Australia as an extension of the spoken language (Green et al 2011). Much of the country around Jay Creek is sacred and out of bounds to women, and Bertha would have had knowledge of this from her editing of Ted’s work (Strehlow, TJ 2006, p. 1).
To Hermann Vogelsang, Point Pass

11th December 1937

Ted has today written
to a fellow missionary’s son.
Like kindred spirits
they were born on the mission field
and raised with Aranda and Dieri in their ears.
Before German,
before English.

And like linked souls
wandering the desert
they come back again
and again to Aboriginal land –

The Dieri of Coopers Creek
have faded
their songs running
to a slow rickle
before melting into the sand.

So he comes,
now looking
for Aranda to serve.

Bertha typed up all Ted’s letters and this poem refers to the letter Ted wrote to Hermann Vogelsang, who was looking for work as an overseer at the newly established Jay Creek. His father had been a lay missionary at Coopers Creek in early 1870s and was known to Carl Strehlow (Australian Archives NT, 1937). The Dieri were the people of the Coopers Creek area who helped John King, the surviving member of the 1862 Burke and Wills expedition. Their generosity to the expedition created a great deal of interest in them and led to settlers and missionaries moving into the area up until the end of the 19th century. Their population was decimated by this contact and by 1915 the Lutheran mission at Bethesda was closed because the numbers of Dieri had dwindled so dramatically; such was the impact of white contact. In the 1890s the New Testament was translated into Dieri by Carl Strehlow and J Reuther but there are very few Dieri speakers today (Harris 1990, pp. 385–9; Strehlow, J 2011, pp. 308–15).
Language lessons

Two girls come each day, bold
they look at picture books, laugh and point.
I listen to their Aranda
but my attempts send them laughing more.

Living with Ted who spoke Aranda first is no help to me.

He sits with the old men writes down stories, just as his father did – writes in Aranda to his mother in Germany. She writes back in German.

I try to find the words, to talk to the girls; not understanding the sounds I hear, I let them laugh.

There are no accounts of Bertha being able to speak Aranda; in fact her son John, in his writings, is critical of her not being able to speak more than a few words of Aranda despite her living at Jay Creek for six years (Strehlow, J 2004). The spelling of ‘Aranda’ is consistent with the spelling at the time Bertha was living in Central Australia. It is now spelt ‘Arrernte’ but it was also spelt ‘Aranta’, ‘Arunta’ and ‘Arunda’ in different texts (Turpin 2004; Edmond 2013).
**Maggie**

She arrived on a Thursday
a month after the flurry of letters.
Nineteen, TB of the larynx
A half caste, her baby
in the Half Caste Home.

We have asked and asked for
more provisions for her.
But it appears a waterproof sheet
is not justified.

Late in the night cold
I see her outside our tent,
her fire a small spot of light.

In August 1938 a young Aboriginal woman called Maggie Taylor was sent to Jay Creek from the ‘Half-Caste Institution’ in Alice Springs because she had been diagnosed with TB of the larynx. Being infectious, she camped near Ted and Bertha’s tent rather than in the camp with the other Aboriginal families. Requests for more provisions for Maggie were denied (TGH field diary 1937). Bertha typed up many letters for Ted about Maggie; these were sent to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, CEA Cook, but to no avail (Strehlow, TGH 1938). After being cared for by Bertha, Maggie became well again and helped Bertha in the house for a time before being sent back to the Half-caste Institution (ibid.). Maggie was close friends with Bertha and came back to help her during her pregnancy and after Theo was born (pers. comm. Olga Radke November 2014, SRC).
Weaving hands

They wanted me here
to wait for the baby
but no one speaks.
I wonder if I imagined the invitation
or dreamt it?

Hand signs around the campfire:
words of silence
through the air,
someone here from Hermannsburg?
old Jack gone to Alice Springs?
Mary clucks and chuckles
as if she knows it’s a bad move for Jack.

This is quiet talk
happening with eyes
and weaving hands

As lives are taken over
by church and state,
this is quiet defiance.
In the spotted shade
on the dirt,
women wait
for the baby.

Bertha was regularly called on to assist with medical matters at Jay Creek where medical help was 45 kilometres away in Alice Springs (Strehlow, TGH 1941, 7 February Report). It was expected she would work in the community and she was never paid. In a letter to Ted from Mr Chinnery, Director of Native Affairs, dated 25 November 1941, there was a suggestion made that Bertha take up the position of Women’s Protector. Ted replied: ‘As you know, my wife has always had the burden of keeping watch over the natives on the Jay Creek Reserve during my trips to other stations in the Centre; and thus she has given out rations, attended to the sick…’ (Strehlow, TGH 1941 9 December). It is through him that we find she wouldn’t be accepting the role, the reason given that it would require her to live and work in Alice Springs.
The birth

The air is pierced
by a soft grunt
and the head is in my hands –
too late for gloves.

She lets out a rush of air,
a frown lowers over her eyes
in grim focus
as her baby is born,
slippery and hard to hold.

Tiny brown arms fly
like she’s falling,
eyes wide with surprise
at the sudden chill
and hard light.

But she takes to the nipple
like she knows,
eyes blinking
in a memory,
like a lens shutter.
The picture of her mother.

No sound from either,
their cocoon of silence
like a held breath.

And I see the blood.

She bleeds –
doesn’t stop.
I lean my hands
into her soft empty belly
but she grows lighter –
the loss
a surprise to her.
Her eyes look at me:
What is this now?

And her baby
cries
like she knows.

Maternal mortality rates in remote areas were extremely high due to blood loss, sepsis and the lack of adequate medical attention. Further, the institutionalisation of Aboriginal people on missions and cattle stations in increasing numbers, following the drought and loss of traditional lands, caused a major change in diet from hunting and gathering to one based primarily on flour, sugar and tea, and in the late 1930s maternal deaths from malnutrition were common (Franklin & White 1991, p. 16). Bertha had the onerous task of caring for the ill and there were many deaths during her time at Jay Creek. She told her daughter-in-law years later that she’d thought of herself as the ‘white medicine man’ at Jay Creek but her medicines were limited to eucalyptus-based preparations for colds and aches and pains (Strehlow, R 2006, p. 2).
First born

My body swells
this time
holding on
to the blood mass
cradled in me.

Doctors orders:
six months in bed,

so I stay and
watch as he goes,
the first of many leavings.

How is it that
a marriage
longs for children,
weeps over their loss,

but is divided by them?

In late 1941 Bertha was pregnant once again and she must have been wondering by now if she would ever be able to have a baby. On the advice of her doctor, Orme Kewish, she followed a strict regime of bed rest and a special diet for the first six months of her pregnancy. She was determined to make sure this pregnancy went to term (Wall 2008, p. 3; Strehlow, J 2004, p. 8) Her son John wrote: ‘She was only able to have children by going to bed for about 6 months each time, taking special medicine and eating a special diet’ (ibid.). Bertha remained silent on these matters, not recording any of the details in her writing.
The first crack

A car door wakes me,
a diesel engine.
Outside the day has not
yet started
and he is gone.
Where to this time?

Later I see the note:
Back in two weeks – Canberra, Ted.
I don’t recall discussing this one.

The day breaks over the hills
and light floods
my room
warning of heat.

A crack is appearing
and I am unsure
how to stop it.

While living at Jay Creek, Ted travelled widely, on patrol in Central Australia to other Aboriginal communities as well as to Adelaide University and Canberra (Hill 2003). Bertha usually remained at home in Jay Creek and took on the role of managing the Jay Creek Reserve where she distributed food and supplies to Aboriginal members of the community (Strehlow, TGH 1939 & 1941, 7 February).
At the end of the frost

Another windy, cloud filled day
but I feel sure the frost is over.

Up early
and the air is warmer,
the ice breath of last week
past now.

The sun comes late to the day
but we are grateful and sit in warmth
in the lee of the breeze.

There, with cup of tea in hand
you tell me it is over
you are called to the army,
that we are to leave
to travel south.

Strange how it feels too soon.
I shiver
and try to imagine
my life without this desert in it.

Bertha’s pregnancy had gone well and she was about to give birth to their first son Theodor at the hospital in Alice Springs which had expanded during the Second World War. The effects of the war were felt in the desert with Alice Springs becoming ‘a major supply base for thousands of Australian and American troops stationed in the north’ (Edmond 2013, p. 183). Following the birth of Theo, Ted was called up to the Army and had to leave for Duntroon, in Canberra. Maggie Taylor came and helped Bertha with baby Theo but Bertha knew her time in Central Australia was coming to an end. There were difficulties ‘obtaining a home of their own’ so Bertha and baby Theo moved into Bertha’s old family home in Adelaide with her father (Crawley 2006, p. 2). ‘At the end of the frost’ is a line from Bertha’s writing (1945).
Chapter 5
The dream
Writing distance

In the cool of the afternoon
I write.
I am too busy in the mornings
and too weary at night.
I know Ted is writing too
far from me in the desert –
it is as if we are a wide ocean
apart.

As voices drift in from the street,
I write, to picture the place
that no photo can do justice to.
Of the cold,
the silver crystals of ice in the kettle
on winter mornings.
Of the people whose language and ways
are as ancient as the
mountains and the valleys.

Of the wide black of the sky
at night,
the light of stars,
like a hundred thousand candles
dotting the blackness.

In 1942 Bertha was living in Adelaide back at her childhood home in Prospect. Despite this, Bertha’s energies and thoughts focused on Central Australia for many years to come as Ted’s work took him back to the area regularly. Often Bertha was the sole breadwinner, with her wages supporting his research. She continued typing up and editing his work, as well as sourcing film and photographic supplies, and on one occasion sent up boxes of oranges for the Hermannsburg Mission on the train (Letters to Ted 1942–1962).
The dream

takes me to hidden rock walls –
rubbed smooth
pink and translucent.
My hand runs the cool stone
where water flows.
It is old here
like the chanting stories
my husband writes.
I hear singing
in the walls like water,
like the deluge
that never comes.

The dream is warm sand
cold rock and red quartz.
I stay here
safe in the wide arms
of old country.
As small birds twitter
in delight at the waterhole.

Central Australia remained an important part of Bertha’s life and she reflected on this often in her many letters (Letters 1945–62). The last two lines of this poem follow in the tradition of John Keats’ ‘And no birds sing’ (1975, p. 162). This poetic technique brings the poem back to stating a fact of nature, leaving the listener/reader with the poem resonating with bird song. Bertha focused on nature in her writing and this poem imagines her remembering Central Australia when it was in the grip of drought and the opposite of this dream: ‘The bush was absolutely silent, as there were no birds even to be seen’ (1945, p. 41).
Camel memories

I am asked often about the camels,
thе trip across the desert,
about going without.

But we had all we needed;
love was our food and shelter,

and years later, when Ted grew stern,
serious,
even hateful,
I’d remind him of our desert time,
laugh at what those camels did.
Their names made me smile,
Mulga, Alice, Burnie, Flossie, Rarji …

and slowly
they would bring him round.

*Bertha gave a number of talks and presentations on radio in Adelaide about her time in Central Australia. She wrote to Ted about when they were apart, saying to him she would rather that he be the one to talk as he was the expert (Letters 22 May 1945, 3 July 1945). She spoke of Ted’s work as a way of creating interest and possible funding for his research, but she also spoke about the living conditions of Aboriginal people and the difficulties she felt they faced in a changing world. Some of the camels came from the police officer in Alice Springs and were returned to them following the trek. Others, including Bertha’s favourite, Flossie, remained at Hermannsburg and were used again by Ted in his 1939 trek.*
I remember
June 1946

I remember
one night
When Ted was away
and the children
were small and sleeping;
it was summer
and the evening air was cool and soft.

I turned the lights off
and the radio to low,
so as not to wake them,
or their grandparents,

and I danced alone
in the silk dark.

Bertha and Ted moved into her father’s house in Prospect, South Australia after they left Jay Creek. It was a small three-bedroom house and they often had a boarder living there to help pay the bills. The children Theo (born 1942), Shirley (born 1944) and John (born 1946) grew up in this house, and Bertha wrote frequently to Ted when he was away on research trips in Central Australia, interstate and overseas, keeping him up with family life (various letters from Bertha to Ted 1945–1962). Bertha told Ted’s biographer of the many letters she had written to Ted: ‘I wanted Ted to be able to slip easily into his place as our head of family, with as full an understanding of the children as possible. I thought that was very important. And anyway our correspondence was a source of joy to me. I think Ted enjoyed it too’ (1981, p. 76).
Traces

When will I look up
and think only of me
– of my children.

Wake in the morning
not dreaming of the desert,

when does the red
stop falling from
the pockets and hems
of my clothes,

when does it
finally wash from my body?

Bertha thought a lot about going back to Central Australia as she wrote in a letter to Ted: ‘I have been amusing myself during the last few nights just before I went to sleep pretending that we were both to go up with Theodor…[w]hat a triumphant return for us both to go back with our son’ (9th July 1945). This letter holds many echoes of the past, her miscarriages, her ill health and the effort required to carry a baby to term, and of the fact that Ted was born in Hermannsburg and that he could bring his own son there. But in the end, Bertha returned only once to Central Australia after moving to Adelaide, when she and Ted brought the three children to Hermannsburg in 1949. Their son Theodor recalls this as a difficult time with pressure placed on him by Ted to learnt Aranda and bush skills in the two months the family was at Hermannsburg (Strehlow TJ 2002, p. 103).
Singing

When he comes home,
we gather the family,
him on the piano,
me singing.

My voice always
a true sound in my ears,
a given,
years ago
the singing examiner said I could go a long way.

After she returned to live in Adelaide Bertha was sought after to sing at events again (Letter to Ted, 1945). Bertha was a soprano, and had sung in recitals in Adelaide before her marriage (Hill 2003; letter from Bertha to Ted 1933). Later in life her son John taught her the recorder which she played until her death in 1987.
Ted’s letter

Saturday 21st May 1955

Dear Bertha

I stood in the doorway of the shack
looking west at Mt Gillen
the sun was setting and
lighting up the broken clouds for the last time today
behind me I could hear you singing,
even though you were far away in Prospect.

It was a sad song,
as though voices from Scotland, Adelaide
and Mt Gillen were all mingling together
expressing the mood of the dying sun,
as yet another day passes into oblivion
and dark eternity.

Wherever I go, it seems
I see only strangers.

After Bertha and Ted returned to Adelaide in 1942, Ted continued to visit Central Australia on research trips. When apart they were prolific letter writers, sometimes writing to each other twice or more each week. In 1955 when this letter was written, Ted was in Central Australia working with a group of old men from Hermannsburg, recording traditional songs and chants in Aranda. Bertha’s letters to him were full of news of the children and social events she’d attended, and Ted’s replies were often like this one, full of melancholia and sadness (Bertha’s letters to Ted 18–29 May 1955; TGH Strehlow 1955 Field Diary XIX).
What my father wanted

What does any father want for his only daughter?
A good husband, a home, many children,
laughter,
faith and sharing,
a life full of family and grandchildren,
and to grow old with her husband.

He shook my husband’s hand at the wedding
said in his kind voice:
‘Take care of my girl.’

He didn’t see the end,
when love drifted
and the years unfolded sadness.

Bertha and Ted and the three children lived in an extended family arrangement in Bertha’s father’s home in Prospect in Adelaide. Bertha’s father adored Bertha and the children. Bertha’s daughter writes about him as a quiet and gentle man: ‘He was an important influence on all of us, and during the adolescence of my brothers and myself he extended his support of Bertha by accompanying us on several holidays. My father always claimed that he was too busy to go with us’ (Crawley 1986, p. 37). Bertha’s father George James died in his sleep at home in August 1962 at the age of 84.
The truth

The stars tell us so little,
yet I gaze ever hopeful
for some clue,

I pull sounds
from your words –
but there is nothing,
just the space between
holding some unknown
truth to climb into.

Bertha went overseas in 1967 to visit her and Ted's eldest son Theodor in Thailand. When she came back Ted had moved into the spare room and by early 1968 he had moved out to live with a young woman. Kathleen Stuart was a high school teacher who had moved to Adelaide in 1964 with her author husband Donald Stuart and their two children. Ted had been tutoring her in English Literature at the University of Adelaide. Ted and Kathleen lived one street away from Bertha in the same suburb (Hill 2003, p. 660).
Separation

I can barely move
the shame hurts
and the light burns,
like the bright of the desert sun
I had to shield from.

He shames me, has shamed me.
I cry alone,
and hold a smile in place
on the streets.

When Ted left Bertha in 1968, she was working as a teacher and was active in community
groups in Adelaide. She was extremely quiet about the separation and told very few people
(Wall 2008). Bertha sued for divorce on the grounds of desertion in 1972. ‘She did not seek
maintenance. She proudly stated that as a senior teacher at Wilderness School for Girls, her
salary was ample for her needs’ (in Hill 2003 p. 700). Her son John reflects: ‘…when the
judge, Justice Mitchell, the first woman judge in SA, asked her if she wanted a clause
included in the settlement about our father’s will, she said no, so we were totally disinherited
of everything…’ (2004, p. 5).
Horseshoe Bend

I learn from a friend,
Ted has written an account of
his father’s death –
finally.

In my kinder moments,
I am glad for him.
Putting ghosts to rest
as it were,
but my harshness surfaces
and I know he cried to her about it.

But we all went there
in the end.
All of us in love with
his sad words.
The story of a dying father,
by the dry riverbed
that led to hell.

And we, the women in his life,
cared for him,
listened,
and loved him
like his mother.

Ted Strehlow published Journey to Horseshoe Bend about the death of his father Carl Strehlow in 1969 (Rigby) using the diary he kept as a 14-year-old boy. Even though the work is a memoir, it is written in the third-person narrative, with Ted referring to himself throughout as Theo (Carter 1996). After the death of his father at Horseshoe Bend, Ted and his mother Frieda travelled to Adelaide where they lived until Ted started university. Only then did Frieda travel back to Germany to be reunited with her other five children. Bertha was all too familiar with this tragic story of loss, and Ted was known for his dramatic moods and sadness about his family. Bertha had divorced Ted by the time the book was published (Hill 2003; Strehlow, J 2004).
3rd October 1978

As the light dims on me
I think of him still,
years try to lessen pain,
the love.

I draw the curtains,
straighten
the tidy room,

but the shadow he cast was long indeed
with me, it seems, always in that shadow.

He dies today,
even that
is a media event.

But, he was never
quiet about himself,
or about anything he did.

Ted Strehlow died of a heart attack on the day of the opening of the Strehlow Research Foundation at the University of Adelaide. He collapsed in the arms of Justice Michael Kirby who was present to open the Research Foundation (Hill 2003, p. 757). Bertha lived for another seven years and died in 1987 following a heart attack. Up until then she was extremely active, volunteering at the Lutheran Mission offices in Adelaide, playing in a recorder group, and regularly attending the opera and theatre with her friends. She had made firm friends with many people in Central Australia and kept in regular contact with them (Strehlow, J 2004). Ted left his life’s work and collection to his second wife Kathleen and their only son Carl. Bertha and her children were not acknowledged in his will (Hill 2003).
I
In the ‘good’ room I no longer use,
on its own table
is the gramophone.
It came with me
through dust storms lasting days,
that blackened out the sun.

I went gladly with my eyes open
into a marriage with a man of dreams.
Into loss,
four babies lost to the desert,
three who stayed.

I saw my life as a circle,
taking in the country,
like I could see it from the air
long before I flew:
far above the dust
where delicate patterns weave through red sand.
I knew the shape of the desert,
and I could picture where he went
when I could no longer travel with him.

In my mind I trailed behind him,
he, always one step ahead.

I prayed our children and the adventure
would hold him to me,
but his dream took in more than desert.
II

My son and his wife are playing the gramophone,
I hear them laughing
as the music scratches the past.

I am frozen at the doorway
as songs of Central Australia
fill the room,
pulled back in time
when I thought his love
and God’s love was all that was needed.

When the tent and the dust
and frozen water
in the washbasin in the mornings
were still part of that love.

When dense mist
hid the mountains and valleys
in mornings
so thick
I thought I could have been
back in the hills
at my father’s house.

III

I ask them to stop.
It is only when they turn the music off
that I move from the door
and take my cold tears outside
into the sunlight.
A short essay by Bertha’s long-time friend, Debbie Little, was written for ‘The Desert Honeymoon’ exhibition held at the Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs in June 2006 in honour of Bertha and her achievements and experiences in Central Australia in the 1930s (Mitchell 2006). Little wrote: ‘A haunting memory for me was her [Bertha’s] appearance in the doorway of a room in which John and I were playing records on an old gramophone…the look on her face was tragic and it was clear from the tears in her eyes that it was a genuinely painful memory for her’ (Little 2004, p.2).
‘When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes ’tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

– Emily Dickinson⁸

Chronology of events

1911  Bertha Streh low nee James born in Adelaide 16 April to Rosamond Delilah Murdoch and George Pugh James of 17 Te Anau Ave, Prospect, South Australia.

1919  Bertha’s mother dies from the effects of influenza while pregnant. Bertha’s father marries Edith Mary Eaton.

1922  Carl Strehlow dies at Horseshoe Bend Station on the Finke River, 51 years. Ted is 14 years of age.

1931  Bertha is Head Prefect in her final year at St Peter’s Girls School, Adelaide.

1932  Bertha commences a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Adelaide. Ted graduates with Honours in English Literature and classics, travels to Central Australia for research.

1933  Bertha and Ted meet at the University of Adelaide and soon after start dating.

1934  Bertha awarded BA in History and Latin from University of Adelaide. Bertha starts teaching at Walford Girls School Adelaide.

1935  Ted receives a fellowship from the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) to investigate the maltreatment of Aboriginal people in Central Australia. Bertha and Ted marry 21 December at Prospect, South Australia.

1936  18 February – arrive in Alice Springs on the Ghan train and travel out to Hermannsburg Mission. They stay with Pastor and Minna Albrecht and start preparations for the camel trek.
    May – Ted is appointed Patrol Officer for the Central Australian region.
    5 June – Bertha and Ted leave Hermannsburg with three Aboriginal men, their camel handlers: George, Witchetty and Tom Ljonga, and eleven camels for a 1400 mile (2250 km) camel trek to the Petermann Ranges.
    19 July – in Charlotte Waters, SA. Bertha is unwell and tells Ted she is pregnant.
    28 August to 7 Sept — at Piltadi in the Petermann Ranges, Bertha becomes gravely ill following the miscarriage.
    25 September – arrive back in Hermannsburg.
    November – Ted and Bertha move to Jay Creek and live in a tent.
    December – Christmas visit from Bertha’s parents.

1937  29 May – Bertha miscarries a boy.
    22 July – Jay Creek (formally ‘The Bungalow’) gazetted as the Jay Creek Native Reserve.

1938  Bertha miscarries again.
    Ted and three Aboriginal friends make two thousand bricks for Ted and Bertha’s house, they move into the house in mid-1938.
    Albert Namatjira’s Exhibition sells out in Melbourne.
    Ted is awarded a Master of Arts for his thesis ‘Aranda Phonetics and Grammar’.
    Blind Moses, an Aranda evangelist from Hermannsburg, becomes the pastor at the Jay Creek Lutheran Church.
    A young Aboriginal woman sick with tuberculosis, Maggie Taylor, moves to Jay Creek. Maggie lives in a tent near Bertha and Ted and when she recovers she helps Bertha with the housework.
1939  Bertha miscarrys a fourth time.  
Outbreak of World War II.  
Ted travels to the Petermann Ranges with Pastor Albrecht, Dr Charles Duguid and Tom Ljonga, they visit Lasseter’s Grave near Docker River on the WA/NT border.

Ted accused of being a Nazi by MLA AM Blain in the Australian Parliament.  
Jay Creek Lutheran Church official opening on 7 December 1940.

1942  May – birth of Bertha’s first son Theo in Alice Springs.  
Ted released from his Patrol Officer position for military service.  
Bertha leaves Central Australia with Theo for her father’s place in Prospect, Adelaide.

1943  Baby Theo sick with polio, Bertha takes him to Melbourne for treatment.

1944  Daughter Shirley is born.

1945  Bertha publishes ‘A Camel trip to the Petermann Ranges across Central Australia’, in *Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*.  
22 May – Bertha speaks on local radio about her time in Central Australia.  
10 June – Bertha talks on ‘Life on an Aboriginal Reserve’ to the Fellowship of Women Graduates.  
Ted appointed as a lieutenant, based in Canberra at Duntroon.  
Second World War ends.

Ted commences lecturing in English and Linguistics at University of Adelaide.

1946  Bertha starts teaching at Walford School.

1949  Bertha publishes the paper ‘Glimpses of Lubra Life’ in *Aborigines Friends Association Newsletter*.

1950-2  Ted in England and Europe on a study tour. He visits his mother, Frieda, and his siblings in Germany.

1950  Bertha rents out a room in the house to a boarder, Mr. Lindsay.

1951  February – Bertha starts teaching at Wilderness School.  
May – a new tenant, Mrs. Morgan, moves into the house with Bertha and her father and children.  
November – Bertha becomes Vice President of the Women Graduates (Tatlers).

1955  Bertha attends the Conference of the Australian Federation of University Women in Queensland.

1956  Bertha serves as President of the Women Graduates.


1957  Frieda Strehlow dies in Germany aged 82 years.

1962  19 August – Bertha’s father George James dies in his sleep at Te Anau Ave, aged 84 years.
1967  Bertha travels to Thailand to see her son Theo and his wife Roti.


1971  Ted publishes *Song of Central Australia* (A&U), the writing of which started in late 1940s.


1973  Ted and Kathleen have a son – Carl.

1978  3 October – Ted dies at the opening of the Strehlow Research Foundation at the University of Adelaide aged 71.

1983–4 Bertha travels to UK to visit her son youngest son John.

1984  30 June – Bertha dies in hospital following a heart attack aged 73.

1985  An agreement is reached between Kathleen Strehlow and Barry Coulter, a MP of the Government of the Northern Territory, on the amount for the purchase of the Strehlow Collection. Plans begin on the construction of the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.
Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry
Contents

Overview 119

Part A History and background 122
Chapter I: The two books, the two souls – an exploration 123
Chapter II: Bertha Strehlow 131
Chapter III: Central Australia – a historical overview 153
Chapter IV: Women, feminism and the desert 169
Chapter V: Writing the landscape as a personal journal 180

Part B Poetry, poetics and the verse novel 190
Chapter VI: Poetry and poetics 191
Chapter VII: The verse novel 208

Conclusion 226
Overview

‘Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s story through poetry’ investigates the verse novel as a device for exploring the gaps and silences in history. The poetry explores place and the ways in which the geographical and cultural landscape contributed to Bertha Strehlow’s identity and her silence. While keeping the narrative focus on Bertha and her story, the poems explore issues faced by white and Aboriginal women living in Central Australia in the mid 1930s to the early 1940s. The poetry of the verse novel provides Bertha with the opportunity to speak out of a silence. It enables her to have an identity in, what was for her, a new landscape. This exploration in verse provides the backdrop and the context to Bertha’s journey into the desert. In the poetry is found a voice that speaks into the silence of her experiences of the desert.

My biographical research on Bertha for the creative work raised questions about her invisibility in the face of the historical focus on the work of her famous husband, anthropologist Ted Strehlow. The verse novel, then, explores Bertha’s relationship to place, as like all white people in Central Australia, Bertha Strehlow was an alien presence; a visitor in the landscape (Harris 1990, p. 386). The land was already and continues to be inscribed and mapped with the stories of the Aboriginal owners (Layton 1986, pp. 13–6; James 2009, pp. 18–31; Rowse 1990, pp. 135–7).

In writing Bertha’s story, dates are my signposts and the markers of what has happened in the past (Gill 1998, p. 71), but between them are gaps of historical silence. Sometimes this is a silence of Bertha’s choosing, as in the paper she wrote for the Royal Geographical Society South Australian conference (1945), where she chose not to discuss the life-threatening events that occurred on the camel trek. Other silences occur, when the writing seems to carry on without her, such as in Ted’s diaries where I know Bertha is present because there are entries where she is “gravely ill”, but then she is not mentioned for days (Strehlow, TGH 1936). These gaps create spaces in a life, the day-to-day things not mentioned, and it is in this space, Atwood writes, that curiosity and imagination can be triggered in the writer (2005, p. 218). To write about Bertha creatively, I have allowed this curiosity to develop by imagining events, inspired by the primary sources without relying on them entirely. In this way the writing is not always a reflex or response to someone else. This is especially true in relation to Ted, as at times the weight of his words stops being a source of information and instead feels like a factor in Bertha’s silence. This occurs throughout the many volumes of Ted’s writing and provided the impetus for me to tell Bertha’s
story. The desire to reveal and uncover a forgotten story grew from the sense of mystery that surrounded Bertha. This is what motivated the editors of a collection of Australian women’s biographies Uncommon Ground (2005). They wanted to write about the silences in history, not just historical fact (Cole et al 2005, p. xxxvii). Martin Edmond also expressed this motivation in regard to his dual biography of Rex Batterbee and Albert Namatjira, where he says:

I wanted to retell a famous story as far as possible without preconceptions and by including the lesser known of the two, Rex Batterbee, as a full and equal partner in the events of the time. (2013, p. iv)

The loss of Bertha in Ted’s narrative is also reflected in her invisibility in history. My writing is in many ways a map of my search for her, a means for me to find a narrative of her. To achieve this, Bertha’s story relies on dates gleaned through her writings, from information in Ted’s copious diaries and from the accounts of her children. These dates mark the events in her life and become the framework for her story. The dates thus become a scaffold to hang the journey on (Crawley 1986, pp. 36–7 & 2004, pp. 106–8; Strehlow, J 2004, pp. 1–8).

My exploration of Bertha Strehlow’s story includes a study of the literature focusing on historical perceptions of women’s voice and silence, and elaborates on Pfisterer and Pickett’s assertion that:

…the way in which historical women have been treated by many Australian historians is neither accurate or flattering, and it is only recently that attention is paid in the study of Australian history to the role of women. (1999, p. 225)

Writers such as Anne Summers (1975), Fiona Paisley (2000, 2005) and Diane Bell (1993, 2001) explore the contention that for many years Australian women have not been ‘silent’; rather, they have been silenced by history. Bell writes of the need for women to reclaim their place in history: ‘clearly there has been a need to reclaim women from the historical record and an accompanying need to generate new data’ (2001, p. 122). In her thesis on 1930s Tennant Creek missionary, Sr. Annie Lock, Catherine Bishop notes:

…women as a group have only been discovered as a serious subject for independent academic consideration in the past 20 years … one of the aims of women’s history is to give women voices in history; to make visible the previously invisible. (1991, p. 3)
Writer Virginia Woolf, in her series of essays on women in fiction *A Room of One’s Own*, discusses the historical difficulties women face due to poverty and lack of opportunities that kept women from being heard (1929, pp. 24 & 32). This is an echo of Bertha’s experiences and resulted in her being silenced. The inspiration for this thesis, then, is the absence of Bertha Strehlow from the historical record, and the verse novel *Giving voice to silence* seeks to redress the silencing of Bertha in history. The following exegesis will provide the background and history that informed the writing of the verse novel, by exploring the life of Bertha Strehlow and her experiences in Central Australia. Against this backdrop, the history of Central Australia is explored, especially in relation to Bertha’s role in that history.
Part A

History and background
Chapter I
The two books, the two souls – an exploration

In Australian experience of the landscape is coterminous with the unconscious: it is vast, ancient, mythological and wholly other.

David Tacey, Edge of the Sacred (2009, p. 99)
Introduction

This chapter investigates Bertha Strehlow’s silence through the concept of Gilles Deleuze’s (1925–1995) ‘two books’, where he suggests that for every story told, there is also a hidden or inner story (1997, p. 72). Deleuze described the two books as the book of ink and the book of the soul, with the book of the soul always remaining absent or silent (Buchanan 2000, p. 3). In the discussion I theorise that Bertha’s book of ink is her published work and the limited writings about her, and that the verse novel Giving voice to silence is an echo of her book of the soul and is an attempt to provide an image of Bertha, revealing things that are unspoken (Weste 2013, p, 2).

Deleuze’s concept of the ‘two books’ provided me with a framework to explore Bertha’s story and a way to give her a voice. The words needed to find her voice – the poems of the verse novel – were inspired by the concept of the ‘book of the soul’, finding inspiration in the poignant ‘gaps’ in the public historical record. The location of Bertha’s story in Central Australia and on Aranda land is significant especially as Bertha’s husband Ted was writing about the spiritual connection the Aranda have with the land. One idea in particular relates to conception and the totemic ancestors, which he coined ‘The doctrine of the two souls’ (Strehlow, TGH 1978, p. 20). Ted discussed his ideas extensively with Bertha, and she commented on and edited his work, resulting in her having a rare understanding of Aranda religious beliefs. The doctrine of two souls posits that each person has two souls which are part of the same entity; one being the guardian, which can leave the human body and return, and the other being the physical human form. The synergy between these two dynamic ideas; Deleuze’s two books, and Arandic two souls, is explored in this chapter in relation to the story of Bertha Strehlow.

Deleuze – a conceptual question

While searching for a possible framework that might make sense of my impulse to write about Bertha, as well as dealing with the issues of imagination and ethics in historical fiction, I read the work of Gilles Deleuze, (1925–1995) and historian Tom Griffiths (2009, p. 8). Deleuze, who became known for writing about philosophers and literature with new insights (Roffe 2005, p. 1), posited that for every writer there are two books to be written: the book in ink and the book that is etched on the soul. In
Deleuze’s own words: ‘a great book is always the inverse of another book that could be only written in the soul, with silence and blood’ (1997, p. 72).

Historian Tom Griffiths’ discourse on imagination and fact also provided a freedom for me in the writing of Bertha’s story as it unfolded in poetry. Griffiths discusses the writer’s conflict when faced with writing ‘truth telling’ and fiction, and states:

Imagination must work in the creative friction with a given world, there are rules as well as freedoms, there are hard edges of reality one must respect … there are silences not of our making [and] these silences and uncertainties should be part of any story we tell. (2009, p. 8)

To work with these ‘hard edges’ and ‘these silences’, I have explored a theoretical approach that suggests a way to understand my writing of Bertha’s story. I examine the concept highlighted by Deleuze and ask: is it possible to use his idea of ‘the two books’ to reveal the untold story of Bertha Strehlow? Is it possible then to tell the story written on the soul – for the writer to ‘speak’ as Bertha? To consider applying this theory to the challenge of writing for, or about, a historical figure, the different aspects of the person’s life need to be considered.

The primary sources of information on Bertha Strehlow include the writings about Bertha by Ted in his diaries (Strehlow, TGH 1936–1955), the limited papers Bertha published (1940, 45 & 49) and her unpublished letters (1945–1960), which I accessed at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs. Following Deleuze’s concept, these sources contribute to the ‘book written in ink’.

Included among these are the writings of her journey across the desert by camel in 1936. The grave illness she suffered following the miscarriage of her baby near Kata Tjuta (Mt Olga) became the book of the soul and the focus of the verse novel, as this remains ‘unsaid’ in her published writing and indeed her life.

In October 1936, soon after returning from the six-month camel trek through 1000 kilometres of desert south-west of Alice Springs, Bertha wrote a letter to her mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow in Germany, to let her know they had arrived in Hermannsburg safely (pp. 1–4). Bertha tells Frieda she miscarried on the trek but did not reveal how ill she really was (Strehlow, B 1936, pp. 3–4). In the letter she writes glowingly of the frame Ted made to attach to the side of the camel, which enabled her to be carried back to the Mission as she was unable to walk. The extent of her dire
situation only really comes to light in reading of the sense of desolation that Ted recorded in his diaries (Strehlow, TGH 1936).

The inverse of the book of ink is for Bertha the book of the soul, the unspoken story revealed in the verse novel. Thus the verse novel is intended to become the inner story – the silent story. Deleuze’s concept provides a framework for stepping into Bertha’s space, enabling the reader to develop an understanding of her character. Poet Emily Ballou, who wrote a verse novel based on the life of Charles Darwin, explains a similar process of entering into the poetry:

> when I speak of ‘poetry’, I am defining it from within my own practice. I take it to mean a grammar of observation and feeling. I mean a condensation and crystallisation of something that was previously amorphous. I mean a written voiceprint that can leap across the gaps between two thoughts or questions; that can travel into the middle of a moment, with or without resolution. A place where the self and the ‘I’ that is I might disappear. (Ballou 2010, p. 3)

This process of ‘entering into’ the moment potentially allows the character to inhabit the mind of the writer. Thus I am able to imagine the internal monologue of Bertha in order to recall her story. Described by Hawryluk and Shilton as ‘capturing the glimpse’, this moment of revelation can lead to inspiration which generates the creation of work (2013, p. 10). When achieved, the experience of entering into the poetry can create an emotional response to the writing in the reader.

While the poetic image of the book of the soul is beneficial conceptually, there have been critics of the theory. Ian Buchanan suggests a difficulty with this theory. The Deleuzian argues that in writing ‘the book of the soul’ yet another book is created and the book of the soul continues to remain unread because it is always defined by its absence (Buchanan 2000, pp. 3–4). Despite this criticism, I believe this is a useful concept, as it helps me to explain why my work on Bertha, which is fiction, will only ever hint at her book of the soul. It can also provide a way to explain how the use of poetry creates and leaves spaces for the work to rest in opening possibilities for what is not said to become part of the story as well.

The two souls

While the concept of the two books provides a theoretical framework for my work of fiction, it has specific relevance in Central Australia when viewed in conjunction with an aspect of the mythology of the Aranda people of the Alice Springs area. It was
only after researching Deleuze’s theory of the two books, that I made the link with the Aranda belief of the ‘two souls’: as mentioned previously, the two souls are part of the same entity of the person, with one being the guardian, which can leave the human from and return, and the other a physical human form. The belief is not commonly known in Central Australia but was told to me many years ago and only after reading some work by Ted (1978), did I sense a link to Deleuze. This becomes apparent when understanding the spiritual connection Aboriginal people perceive with the land (Katakaringa 2010, pp. 4–7). Bertha edited an early version of Ted’s 1978 paper, which explores the mythological stories of the two souls, and would have known of the stories related to this belief. Ted writes of the two souls in his booklet Personal Monototemism in a Polytotemic Community, (1978) which discusses the traditional beliefs of ‘conception sites’. This is related to the idea of conception and birth, and is fundamental to the spiritual belief of the Aranda people and their relationship to their lands. Ted writes:

… the Aranda doctrine of conception involves a belief in two souls possessed by every human being…the foetus has a ‘mortal life’ (or ‘soul’)…and comes into being like the animals…the second soul is part of the ‘life’ of one of the immortal supernatural ancestors, which has entered the body of an already pregnant woman at some definite point in the landscape. (Strehlow 1978, p. 21)

The belief in the two souls is a vital part of the religious life of Central Australia and as such has been the focus of much research. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the poetic imagery of this belief system, and how it is an essential and practical part of daily life for Aboriginal people. The belief is focused on the land and the ancestral beings whose movement across the landscape created the physical features of country as it exists today. It is possible for family members to see the two souls of the one person. For example, when seeing a hunter returning to camp it can appear that two people who are exactly alike are approaching the camp. But as they get closer to the camp they become one person again: ‘…and the watchers at the camp would realize (sic) what they had been looking at’ (Strehlow, TGH 1995, p. 23).

The country of Central Australia is imbued with poetic resonance and an understanding and acknowledgement of the land as a story map. The stories that are told and the people telling the stories are all part of this. It is not the purpose of this thesis to explore Aboriginal belief systems, rather to acknowledge the possible
influences that knowledge of the story of the two souls had on Bertha as a Western woman becoming pregnant and then losing her baby in this richly storied landscape and the resonances she experienced there. Even though Bertha wrote and acknowledged that Aboriginal people had differing beliefs to her own, in the moment of her greatest despair when she felt she was facing death in the desert, the resonances of the two souls with her own experiences needs to be acknowledged. Thus, having knowledge of the two souls provides an understanding of the emotional depths she experienced when losing her baby. This is evoked in the poem ‘Beauty’, where the reader hears the voice of Bertha as she speaks of the level of desolation she is experiencing.

we are here alone –
our baby gone now.

Her tiny, hardly formed body
buried by the tree
where I have cried myself empty.

(Shilton 2015 p. 57)

Ted and Bertha are altered from this moment on. The intensity of the present, with the shocking loss of their first child, the fear and intimacy evoked in their relationship along with their physical isolation, impacted on future events. It was only Ted’s account of this experience that was known as he wrote in his diaries of repercussions of their time in the desert and how this might overshadow the couple’s future. Bertha makes a brief mention of these events in a letter to her mother-in-law Frieda, where she says:

We have not told anyone else except my people about the nature of my illness and we don’t intend to. The people here at the Mission know that I was ill and have seen the carriage but don’t know why I was carried in it. I know you will not mention it to anyone because the nature of Ted’s new position will bring about plenty of unfriendliness towards us and we don’t want to give people the opportunity to criticize (sic) our private affairs. (1936, p. 4)

Bertha’s need for privacy is evident in her writing; thus, as I wrote her poems I was conscious of her sensitivities around these matters.
**Putting character into verse**

The development of and engagement with character explains its use in the writing of historical fiction where the character speaks directly to the reader. The characters in *Giving voice to silence* are historical figures and while the story has its essence based in fact, it uses fictional devices where Bertha tells a story she may never have spoken aloud (Grenville 2007, p. 1). With my engagement of the concept of the ‘two books’, the persona-narrator of Bertha has the opportunity to speak into the silence of history.

The past, present and future intersect in the lives of the characters as past events come into the present at moments of crisis for Bertha. The continuity of time has a metaphorical effect as it evokes the timelessness of the desert and thus operates at a deeper level across the whole story. Mallan and McGillis call this ‘parataxis’ and explain the process as continuity between past, present and future (2003, p. 4). For the poem ‘Beauty’ and others in *Giving voice to silence*, the writing technique of parataxis is employed to evoke a sense that the characters are ‘outside time’ in the desert. This device mimics the storied landscape that Bertha and Ted were journeying through.

The use of parataxis and other techniques such as fragmentation and metaphor can evoke an intensity of emotion in the reader (Bennett 2012, p. 9). The space in poetry allows the reader’s imagination to fill in the ‘gaps’ as the characters step out of history and become people that can be identified with. In her verse novel on the life of Charles Darwin, Emily Ballou describes this process of bringing Darwin’s character into being as lighting ‘…a fragile, deeply felt humanity, and capturing the textures of his work and dreams…’ (Ballou 2009, p. 232). The idea of the ‘continuity in time’, a metaphor for the agelessness of the landscape, was proposed in 1938 by anthropologist WEH Stanner when he coined the word ‘everywhen’ to explain the Aboriginal concept of ‘The Dreaming’, as a narrative of creation times (2010, p. 9).

**Conclusion**

The aim of writing a verse novel about Bertha Strehlow was to open up her ‘quiet’ past by writing about an historical character not widely known, who has had very little, if anything written about her. Deleuze’s (1997) concept of the two books demonstrates the importance of ‘giving voice to silence’ when considering the small number of records Bertha left. Besides the primary sources, there are no historical texts, commentaries or theoretical works on Bertha Strehlow. Bertha wrote a number
of articles about her desert experiences (1945 & 1949) and spoke at the 1944 Royal Geographical Society conference (1945, pp. 31–48). Bertha also made a number of talks and radio appearances about her experiences of living in the desert after she returned to live in Adelaide (1945). In 2006, the Director of the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC), Dr Scott Mitchell, gathered together information about Bertha from family and friends for a new exhibition. He called the exhibition Desert Honeymoon, (2006) and through film, photography and a brief commentary, it relayed information about the 1936 Petermann Ranges camel trek, which focused solely on Bertha Strehlow and her experiences. By writing about an historical figure there is a real sense of the writing coming out of silence.

The beauty of Deleuze’s (1997) image of the book written on the soul has found its way into my writing processes of Bertha’s story, and while I’m mindful of the debate over validity and ‘truth’ and historical fiction as voiced by Clendinnen and others (2006, pp. 1-28), to be discussed further in forthcoming chapters, Deleuze’s concept remains a guide in imagining and writing the work. The concept of the ‘two books’ is intriguing because as even as I entered into Bertha’s story and her life by writing her biography in poetry, the book of the soul would always remain ‘absent’, and her story would always remain with her. Academic Daniel Varndell, discusses the complexity of this idea as, ‘if we cannot read such a book of the soul, it is because it is always in the past’ (2014, p. 178). So while being driven by the need to face the silences in Bertha’s history, I also acknowledge that I am leaving the truth of Bertha’s story with her. The impulse to write Bertha’s story has been driven by the need to face the silences. As Griffiths has suggested (2009, p. 8), the writing provides a way into silence ‘not of my making’, to give Bertha a voice she was denied in life. Further, an exploration of The Darwin Poems (Ballou 2009) as an example of the versatility of the verse novel, demonstrates how the genre can be used to explore the ‘book of the soul’. Bertha’s voice was always my guide as I wrote, as in this passage where the sense of longing is palpable: ‘and as one looked west there was nothing to be seen but for miles of gibbers’ (1945, p. 32). As I focused on Bertha’s writing and her turns of phrase in the limited work she left, I sensed the longing in her work – her writing helped my poems shift between fact and fiction as the story arrived like a desert ‘wave at my feet’ (Brophy 2003, p. 171).
Chapter II

Bertha Strehlow

Months before coming to Central Australia, I knew that once here I should spend a year either touring with my husband with a camel team or living in a tent. How these things were done I had no idea, but I did not doubt that I would enjoy the life.

Bertha Strehlow, *Through Central Australia* (1940, p. 9)
Introduction

Bertha James grew up in the middle-class Adelaide suburb of Prospect in the 1920s, in a household that provided her with a great deal of love and stability. However, a closer examination of a seemingly unremarkable childhood reveals substantial elements of loss. Bertha’s story shows that it was the tension between these factors of loss and love that were to provide her with the foundations to achieve extraordinary things in her life, and enable her to overcome the physical and emotional difficulties she was faced with. Because of the loss of her mother when she was a small girl, the safety, preservation and financial security of his family was a preoccupation for Bertha’s father George James. Similarly, this also became a preoccupation for Bertha throughout her married life. The care of her children and supporting her family financially – frequently as a sole parent – were fundamental to her. These themes run through her story and demonstrate her hitherto unrecognised yet extraordinary life.

My purpose in writing Giving voice to silence is to reveal the life of a woman whose substantial contribution to the people and development of Central Australia has largely gone unnoticed and unrecognised (Crawley 2004, p. 107). I have drawn together fragments of writing from Bertha’s letters and Ted’s diaries held at the Strehlow Research Centre, the writing of Ted’s biographer, and other historical sources, to create the verse novel and the exegesis.

In 1935, when Bertha married, she stepped away from a comfortable life in middle class Adelaide and travelled to Central Australia into a life that was considered an unlikely choice for a woman to make in the early years of the 20th century. In the desert, Bertha’s life with Ted Strehlow was to be governed completely by his work as she was in effect the patrol officer’s unpaid assistant (Hill 2003, p. 307). At Hermannsburg, and then at Jay Creek, Bertha was involved in improving the living conditions and health of the Aboriginal people who had been moved out of their traditional lands with the arrival of white settlers in the late 19th century (Harris 1990, p. 404). While at Jay Creek, Bertha worked with the generation of Aboriginal people who had lived most of their lives in missions or on white pastoral settlements following the loss of access to their traditional lands. They had little memory of the nomadic life of their parents; the life before missionaries, police and white settlers in Central Australia (Austin-Broos 2009, p. 3). Bertha’s life revolved around the very practical tasks of distributing food and clothing to the residents of Jay Creek and providing medical assistance when needed. Bertha made it her primary focus to
support Ted in his duties as Patrol Officer, as he serviced the many thousands of miles of Central Australia and managed the community of Jay Creek. Bertha’s youngest son John has written about Bertha and comments on the contribution she made to life in Central Australia:

Bertha was deeply romantic, but also intensely practical, qualities not overly common in combination, and it was this which enabled her to achieve what she did. If she has left a legacy in Central Australia, it is decency. She helped a better world come into existence…than she found when she arrived, and we are all in her debt for that. What more can one ask? (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 8)

A new appreciation of Bertha’s contribution and experiences in Central Australia came to light during the 2002 Strehlow Conference held at the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC) in Alice Springs when a photographic display was set up devoted exclusively to Bertha’s time in Central Australia. At this conference many people heard about Bertha Strehlow for the first time and gained an awareness of her contribution to the history of Central Australia. The extent of this was acknowledged when her adult children spoke of her adventures as well as the difficulties she faced. They spoke with raw honesty and love for their mother about the cost that the traumas had on them all. Her daughter Shirley said about Bertha at the conference:

It has been said on many occasions that behind every great man there is a great woman, and I would like to make that claim for my mother today. It was she who was prepared to leave the comforts of a suburban house in Adelaide soon after her marriage to my father in order to live in a tent in Jay Creek for two years until a house was built; it was she who cheerfully accompanied him on a number of epic camel journeys associated with his work; and it was she who assumed full responsibility for the rearing of us three children for lengthy periods of time. (Crawley 2004, p. 107)

To allow a greater understanding of her background and her motivations, in this chapter I provide a history of Bertha’s family and outline the chronology of her own life, giving a context to her place and role in history. This includes an overview of Bertha’s life prior to arriving in Central Australia and some background into her early relationship with her husband Ted. My exploration of Bertha’s experiences in Central Australia in the 1930s underpins the events explored in the creative work. I review, in particular, how unprepared Ted and Bertha were for the medical issues that arose during their camel trek in the desert in the winter of 1936. The events of this
trek are pivotal and focus on the dangers faced by Bertha arising from her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage that led to her becoming gravely ill.

**The Jameses – Bertha’s family**

Bertha’s father’s family settled in Adelaide in 1838 as part of a select group of people who became known as the ‘Old Colonists’ (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 6). Arriving from London on the *Royal Admiral* into Adelaide, they were among the first groups of white people to settle in South Australia (*Royal Admiral Report 1838*, p. 1). As ‘free settlers’, these early groups were proud of the fact that they were migrating to a ‘planned’ rather than a convict society. The South Australian settlement was distinctive in Australia in the 1840s because, unlike the other parts of the country, it had a planned approach to settlement. It was implemented in 1834 and aimed to provide social and financial opportunities for the new immigrants. It proposed a society to suit ‘the moral, economic, political and religious needs of the rising class of mercantile capitalists’ (Summers 1975, pp. 297–8). To fund this ideal society, ‘the crown was to sell its land at no less than twelve shillings per acre; proceeds would meet emigration and other costs…there would be no convicts’ (Roe 1985, p. 85). This social framework was adopted four years before Bertha’s great grandfather, George James, disembarked in South Australia with his wife Mary Pugh. The young couple thus had the opportunity to establish themselves within a thriving business community in the new colony.

Bertha’s great grandfather, George James (1811–1888), appears as ‘No. 153’ in the register of new settlers to the colony (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 6). These new settlers were remembered as pioneers and much lauded at the jubilee celebrations in South Australia in 1886 (Hirst 1984, p. 16). The James family set themselves up in the business community of Adelaide and the family name became part of the ‘establishment’ of a town that continued its strong affiliations with the British Empire. Reference to Bertha’s family remains today in the centre of Adelaide, with a lane called ‘James Place’ off Rundle Mall, named after Bertha’s great grandfather George James, the publican who owned and ran *The Norfolk Arms* in that location (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 6).

Bertha’s grandfather Charles Pugh James (b.1854) was married to Fanny Agatha Moran, whose own family originated from Cork in Ireland. Together they had a large family of four sons and two daughters. Charles had a great love for music and
sang in amateur Gilbert and Sullivan performances throughout South Australia. This love of music and talent for singing was to surface again in Bertha when as a young woman she was hailed as a fine solo soprano for her performances at the Adelaide Town Hall (Wall 2008, p. 1). Bertha’s father, George Pugh James, (1878–1962), was studying accountancy when news of the Boer War broke. He chose to stay home to work and support the family rather than volunteering to fight, though there must have been some pressure to go, as two of his brothers signed up for both the Boer War and the First World War. The family of Charles and Fanny continued the tradition as staunch British Empire loyalists. They were members of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church in central Adelaide and well regarded in the Adelaide establishment (Strehlow, J 2004, pp. 6–7).

Bertha’s father George worked as an accountant for John Shearer Pty Ltd until he retired, the same company he’d started working for as a young man (Strehlow J 2013, per. comm). He was a careful, methodical man who supported Bertha in whatever way he could throughout his life. In 1942, after the birth of her first son Theo, Bertha had to leave Central Australia as Ted was called up to the army, and her father welcomed her back to her childhood home in Adelaide. Later, Bertha, Ted and their three children, Theo, Shirley and John, all lived with him at the Prospect house until his death in 1962 (Strehlow, B 1962, letter to Ted). Bertha inherited the family home and except for her years in Central Australia early in her marriage, she lived there throughout her entire life.

**Bertha**

Bertha Gwendolyn Alexandria James was born on 16 April 1911 in Adelaide to Rosamond Murdoch and George Pugh James. She was to be their only child. In 1919 when Bertha’s mother Rosamond was several months pregnant, she and the unborn baby died in the tragedy of the post First World War flu epidemic along with 11,500 other Australians (Strehlow, J 2012, p. 7; Turner 1985, p. 355). Bertha was only eight years old when she lost her mother, and the trauma of this escalated further with the suggestion that Bertha would become a ward of the state. Two of Bertha’s children, Shirley and John, have recounted this family story which suggested there needed to be a female presence in the household to take care of Bertha, without which she was at risk of being removed (Strehlow, J 2012, p. 8; Crawley 1986, p. 36).
The 1895 State Children’s Act legislated control over children’s lives when Bertha was a young girl, with a particular focus on disadvantaged children. The Act ‘…gave the government power to place neglected “destitute” and “wandering” children in institutions’ (Eveline 2001, p. 151). It also gave police the authority to remove children, as Part IV section 32 of the Act states that ‘[a]ny constable may, without a warrant, apprehend any child appearing or suspected to be a destitute or neglected child, and take such child before Justices’ (1895, p. 9). Because The Act focused on disadvantage it was actively used to remove Aboriginal children from their families, giving police and authorities the authority as they applied the terms ‘destitute and neglected’ to the way Aboriginal families lived (Farrell 2001, p. 135).

Given the stories of the love and care of her father, and except for the impact of the Great Depression, there was no obvious financial disadvantage in Bertha’s childhood, making the removal of Bertha from such a household unlikely. It is possible that the idea grew from a social imperative – that Bertha needed the nurturing care of a woman – rather than a legal one. Ironically, a later version of this Act enacted in the Northern Territory impacted on Bertha’s life again when she lived at Jay Creek in 1937. At this time Ted and Bertha were faced with having to preside over the removal from Jay Creek of part-Aboriginal children who were sent to The Bungalow [known as the ‘Half-caste Institution’] in Alice Springs or to institutions in Darwin (Strehlow, TGH 1939, p. 2; Rowse 1998, p. 69).

Regardless of the reason, a perceived urgency in the need to retain custody of Bertha could explain the hasty remarriage of Bertha’s father, to Edith Mary Eaton later in the same year, and after a short period staying with relatives Bertha was able to come home again. Her stepmother was 52 years of age and older than George James when they married. There were no children from their marriage. Edith was unwell for much of Bertha’s life, spending extended periods of time in psychiatric institutions. Despite this, there was real affection between Bertha and Edith over the years and Bertha always referred to Edith as ‘mother’ (Crawley 1986, p. 36).

Around the time of her mother’s death Bertha also suffered the loss of her favourite cousin at the Somme in France. This information is especially pertinent because as a young woman Bertha fell in love and married a man of German decent. In doing this she challenged the attitudes of her family and friends, many of whom held great resentment and antipathy towards Germans. Bertha’s stepmother Edith, in particular, held a deep animosity towards Germans. This animosity later extended to
Ted Strehlow, requiring Bertha to act as the peacemaker who stepped in to placate them both (Crawley 1986, p. 37).

The traumas of her mother’s death early in her life appear to have had the effect of strengthening Bertha against loss and building her resilient nature. Hill (2003) writes that these hardships ‘developed in Bertha skills that few women of her age had: of coping with the highly strung and sick of heart’ (p. 231). The emotional trauma and deprivation she experienced as a child can only be imagined, but it appears that the care of her father had a lasting and positive effect. It was a time in history when many children suffered grief and loss due to war and illness, but with the social constraints of the era it is unlikely there was much attention paid to their grief. In post-war Australia the emphasis was on the nation’s grief rather than individual grief (Dowd 2011, p. 137). This focus was expressed as a hope ‘…that the agony through which Australia had passed would produce a new flowering of the Australian spirit’ (Turner 1985, p. 355). Within Bertha’s home, there is little evidence this grief was expressed as she grew up, and friends of Bertha’s noted that she only ever mentioned her birth mother much later in life (Wall 2008, p. 2 & Saddler nd, p. 2).

An inability to speak about the loss of a parent creates silence in the household, an idea explored by author Colm Tóibín in Nora Webster (2014). He writes from his own childhood experiences where he places the child as central to the trauma. He posits that the experience of loss becomes a silent space in the family for three or four years after the parental death, until the child starts to perceive this silence as ‘normal’. Over time, as the child grows into adulthood, the loss can become silent and submerged pain (Tóibín 2014). Because both Bertha and Ted suffered the loss of a parent in childhood, this may have been a recognisable factor in each other when they met, and I wonder if it was their ability to perceive this grief and loss that drew them together.

Bertha’s father’s care and concern may have helped counteract the lack of reference points for her when she was a small child. He clearly adored her and as she grew up, he ensured there were adequate financial provisions for her to attend the prestigious St Peter’s Girls School in Adelaide. Bertha’s enrolment there followed a family tradition where her grandfather, father and uncles were all students at St Peter’s Boys School. Her outstanding academic and social abilities resulted in her becoming head prefect in her final year at St Peter’s. In 1932 she went on to study
Latin and ancient history at the University of Adelaide, where she became one of the first women to graduate in 1934 with a Bachelor of Arts (Wall 2008, p. 1). When she completed her studies Bertha became an English teacher at the Walford Girls School in Adelaide. She taught there until her marriage the following year. Her lively, friendly spirit meant she remained firm friends with her many university colleagues throughout her life. Her interest in the importance of the role of women in university and professional life is evident by her membership of the Tatlers Club (Dean nd, p. 2). Tatlers was a women’s literary club, founded in 1932 by Bertha’s long-time friend and the first female judge in South Australia, Dame Roma Mitchell (Magaret & Round 2009, p. 38). At different times over the many years of her membership, Bertha held a number of office-bearer positions, including Secretary, Vice President and finally President in 1954 (Strehlow, B 1951, Letter to Ted; Wall 2008, p. 2).

Meeting Ted

Meeting Ted Strehlow at a dance at the University of Adelaide was to change Bertha’s life. They had first met years earlier and knew each other through mutual friends, and Bertha had previously written to Ted while he was on a research trip to Horseshoe Bend Station on the Finke River, but they hadn’t, up until this point, spent any time alone together. Ted had just returned from a successful linguistic field trip in Central Australia. This first meeting was memorable according to Ted’s biographer, Barry Hill (2003), because Ted was preoccupied, not by Bertha, but by her news. Bertha knew from her friends that Ted had grown up in Central Australia. She also knew Sheila Elliott of Horseshoe Bend Station, as Sheila had spent time living in Adelaide for her education (McNally 1981, p. 42). Because of these Central Australian connections, Bertha thought Ted would be interested in the news of Sheila’s recent engagement to the local policeman. But she wasn’t to know that Ted had held strong feelings for Sheila, which he thought were reciprocated. Ted was incensed at the news and became angry (Hill 2003, p. 229).

Sheila Elliott was the daughter of Gus and Ruby Elliott, the owners of Horseshoe Bend Station, named for the sharp curve the creek bed takes at that point of the Finke River. Ted had met Sheila a number of years earlier in 1932 when he stayed at Horseshoe Bend on a research trip, and at the time, he’d imagined a mutual attraction. He’d first met Sheila’s parents many years earlier as a young man of 14 years when he’d travelled there with his gravely ill father. Horseshoe Bend Station
factors regularly in Ted’s story as a place of loss and disappointment. His father Carl Strehlow died and was buried there in 1922. Many years after his father’s death, Ted wrote *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, which was based on his boyhood diaries of the experience. The book wasn’t published until 1969, many years after Bertha herself had visited the station on the 1936 camel trek (Hill 2003, p. 239). Horseshoe Bend Station is one of the recurring themes in Bertha and Ted’s story. It reappears as a physical place but also as a metaphor for Bertha and Ted’s experiences of loss. Locations reappear; paths are crossed and re-crossed as their story unfolds. The details of Horseshoe Bend come later on in the narrative, but the anecdote of Bertha and Ted’s first meeting demonstrates the quality of Bertha’s patient and accepting character in that she wasn’t offended by Ted’s abrupt and rude outburst at their first meeting. It was only on their second meeting that Ted recounted noticing Bertha’s striking auburn hair (Wall 2008, p. 1; McNally 1981, p. 43). Bertha was already interested in him and was not put off by his forthright manner, and she became more intrigued with him after he shared some of his field diaries with her:

> One day he left with me his diaries and a box of coloured photographs he had taken in Central Australia for me to read and look at...I learnt from Ted’s diaries the hardship he had to endure to perform his work. (1981, p. 43)

Bertha and Ted wrote to each other in earnest after the dance. Her generosity is evident in the early letters she wrote to Ted where she showed genuine interest in his work. Their early letters were light-hearted, discussing general matters about their work, but Bertha already demonstrated her intense interest and concern for other people. She was intrigued by his work and asked him questions about the various people he’d mentioned in previous letters, and, as time passed, his concerns and worries became hers. These letters also show her propensity for placing his work ahead of hers. This attitude is also reflected in the reading materials of the time, such as the newly established *Australian Women’s Weekly*, which ‘made feminine subservience and male dominance appear legitimate’ (Wright in Summers 1975, p. 413). It was possible that in this early correspondence between the young couple, Bertha was seeing the life ahead – a life with a man whose background, upbringing and passion for his work would govern both their lives. But she was not deterred.

In one letter she has had special interest paid to her by the singing examiner who told her she could go a long way with her singing (Strehlow, B 1933). In another
she was rushing off to oversee her students who were sitting their end-of-year exams (3 November 1935). By 1935, after writing to each other for two years, the letters change tone, now holding great warmth and open affection. Romance had grown and she’d agreed to marry him (McNally 1981, p. 44). The couple became engaged before Ted went away on a research trip to Central Australia in 1934 and much of their wedding plans were discussed by mail (Strehlow, B 1935).

‘Darling Dearest Sweetheart’ Bertha writes in a letter dated 15 November 1935, ‘I’ve quite decided to be dressed as a bride and thought it would be lovely to ask Clare to be my bridesmaid’. Bertha calls him ‘Teddy Bear’ and signs off ‘Goodbye dearest darling, with all my love always your own Bertha’ (1935).

Bertha’s father George James, though supportive of Bertha, was to lose his only daughter to marriage and the desert. His primary concern had always been to keep his family together and Bertha’s forthcoming marriage to Ted heralded a huge change in his life. His letters are steady and supportive without any sense of surprise or alarm at Bertha’s choice of husband, Ted, being of German descent, and the child of Lutheran missionaries. There was concern from Bertha’s stepmother though, because of her extreme dislike of Germans. Bertha’s forthcoming move to Central Australia immediately following the marriage, however, caused both her parents concern. As McNally relates:

When Bertha told her parents she intended going almost immediately to the Northern Territory with her husband, they were a little shocked, and expressed the fear that she would find the life too rigorous. But she told them not to worry, and anyway, it was her duty as a wife to be with her husband. (1981, p. 44)

Mr James was both a generous and a polite man. His letters to Ted over many years are now held at the Strehlow Research Centre Library, where they are revealed as formal but written with a great deal of warmth (James, 1936–1945). A letter written very early in Bertha and Ted’s marriage suggests some of his anxiety at Bertha travelling into the desert so far from home. In this letter, dated after Bertha had already left for the camel trek he reveals his worries:

It is great to know that dear Bertha is so well and enjoying the trip so look after her well Ted, as she is the greatest treasure on earth to us…do not take any risks. (13 June 1936)
George James wasn’t to know how well founded his anxieties were, for when this letter arrived in the desert, Bertha was already extremely unwell with morning sickness. But by this stage in the trek Ted and Bertha were in a remote and isolated part of Central Australia and weren’t able to make contact with the outside world. Ted commented in the privacy of his diaries that he wasn’t sure if he and Bertha should continue to the Petermann Ranges, west of Uluru (Strehlow, TGH 1936). But despite her being so ill with morning sickness, they continued on their journey deep into remote desert country, with a blind confidence as well as their absolute belief in God to sustain them. In many ways it was Ted’s overconfidence in his own knowledge of the people and the country that made the journey such a dangerous one. An understanding of Ted Strehlow’s background in Central Australia is helpful to appreciate why Bertha so readily went with him into the desert.

**Ted**

When she married Ted in 1935, Bertha was marrying into a desert missionary dynasty that had established itself at Hermannsburg on Aranda land, to the west of Alice Springs in Central Australia, before the turn of the century. Ted was the youngest child of Lutheran missionaries Carl and Frieda Strehlow, who arrived in Hermannsburg in 1894, where Carl was the Superintendent for 28 years from 1894 until his death in 1922 (Harris 1990, pp. 40410). Ted was born in 1908 and grew up among the Aranda people until he was 14 years old. In many ways he had a most unusual childhood. Along with his parents and the other missionaries at Hermannsburg, he was one of just a handful of white Australians at the time to speak, read and write the Aranda language (Strehlow, J 2011, p. 181). By the time Ted had met Bertha at the university dance, he had already started on what would become his lifelong passion of recording by audio and film, and writing down Aranda songs, dances and legends. In this work he was following the linguistic and anthropological work started by his father, Carl Strehlow.

It was predominately the anthropological research of Carl Strehlow, rather than his missionary legacy, that was to influence Ted and set the direction for his life’s work. Carl’s writings included the eight-volume *Die Aranda und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien, 1907–1921 [The Aranda and Loritja Tribes of Central Australia, 1907–1921]*, a massive work described as:
…the richest and densest ethnographic text written on Western Aranda and Loritja cultures of central Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century… [it] is the first Australian work that comprehensively records the oral literature of Australian Aboriginal people in their own languages. (Kenny 2013, p. 7)

In these books, Carl recorded the Aranda myths, legends, songs and chants told to him by a group of old men at Hermannsburg (Strehlow, TGH 1969, p. 5). Carl Strehlow’s achievements were ignored by the British anthropological hierarchy, partly because of the language barrier, but also because of the anti-German sentiment which arose following the First World War (Turner 1985, p. 343). Historian Barbara Henson comments on the importance of Carl Strehlow’s work, saying that ‘[n]othing of this kind of exploration of Aranda traditional culture was to be undertaken again in Lutheran mission work for another fifty years’ (Henson 1992, p. 13). Another century was to pass before Carl’s research was acknowledged for its sheer scope and magnitude. Even today, the translations into English have not found a publisher (Kenny 2013, pp. 2–3). Years later Ted drew on his father’s primary research, even though he never acknowledged it was Carl’s documentation. Indeed, Carl’s Aranda and Loritja wordlist became important early in Ted’s research when he made use of it to help him communicate with Aranda men on his 1932 trip to Central Australia (Strehlow, J 2011, pp. 178–9 & 1072).

Ted grew up in a large family which included his nuclear family of one sister and four brothers, as well as the intensely close Christian community of Aboriginal and white workers at the Hermannsburg Mission. In 1910, when Ted was only two years of age, his parents took their first holiday since arriving at Hermannsburg. They travelled to Germany, visiting family members and giving talks to raise money for the Mission. This journey was especially significant because Carl and Frieda decided to leave five of their six children in Germany to live with relatives and attend school there. Herman, the youngest of the children to stay in Germany, was only five at the time. Carl and Frieda returned to Hermannsburg with Ted, who then grew up from the age of three as an only child (Crawley 2004, p. 106). The outbreak of World War One in 1914 prevented their return to Germany, destroying any chance of a family reunion. Tragically, Carl would never see his children again and it was another 20 years before Frieda saw her five children in Germany (Strehlow, W 2011, pp. 121–2).

Ted was home schooled, with his father instructing him in religious, language and academic lessons. Living at Hermannsburg, he grew up multilingual, speaking,
reading and writing in German, Aranda and English. The harrowing experience of accompanying his dying father to Horseshoe Bend Station on the Finke River contributed to his sense of isolation and loss as a young man, and his book about the experience demonstrates this perception (1969). Hill comments, ‘This is the book in which Strehlow most successfully and self-consciously takes possession of his past, including his Aboriginal understandings’ (2003, p. 642). In Journey to Horseshoe Bend, Ted refers to himself in the third person as ‘Theo’, the name Bertha and Ted later gave to their first-born child. He was an isolated young man who was starting to question his Lutheran faith in the face of the injustice of the poor treatment of his father by the Lutheran church. He writes, ‘He [Theo] was suddenly experiencing an overpowering sense of loss…an uncertain future lay menacingly before him’ (1969, p. 211). Bertha was marrying a complicated and often sad young man who saw himself as separate and isolated from most people. Years later, Ted expressed the gap that he felt between himself and others to his long-time friend and supporter, Dr Charles Duguid:

I am one of the very few Australians who has felt himself to be Australian [Ted’s underlining] – with no ties of loyalty to any outside country – neither British Isles, Germany, the USA…My emotional attachment to Central Australia derives of course to a very large degree from my being steeped in the aboriginal (sic) traditions of the Aranda, the Loritja and other inland groups; and Aranda has and always will have for me the emotional overtones of a mother tongue. (1970, p. 1)

This difference – borne of his birthplace, his heritage and his chosen career – resulted in overconfidence in his own abilities and his place in history. This self-confident attitude may well have been warranted as Ted was a brilliant linguist, but it created much tension around him in his professional and personal relationships. Philip Jones writes of the effect of this on Strehlow’s later life:

…during the mid-1960s, his family life disintegrated. In 1968 he left Bertha and began living with his new secretary and research assistant, Kathleen Stuart, née Anderson…His marriage was dissolved on 6 September 1972…[later that year] he married Kathleen. Their [Ted and Kathleen’s] official correspondence was increasingly barbed with venom and directed at phantom conspiracies. (2002, p. 1)

The journey Bertha was starting with him in 1936 though was linked to the field trips to Central Australia Ted made between 1932 and 1935. These trips not only
laid the groundwork for his life’s career, solidifying his knowledge of Aranda, but also gave him the space to develop practical experience as a camel handler, map-reader and competent bushman (Hill 2003, pp. 190 & 204–7). When, in 1935 Ted received funding from the Australia National Research Council (ANRC) to carry out research into language and cultural stories of the Aboriginal people living along the Ghan rail sidings, Bertha felt as Ted’s wife, it was her role to travel with her husband. She expressed an eagerness and delight to be travelling with him: ‘After all, I was young and in love with a man who was already making an impact on the nation as an explorer and humanist’ (McNally 1981, p. 47). Biographers have written of the ‘find’ Ted had in Bertha, describing her as ‘touched by his compassion [for his Aboriginal friends] because she was, herself, a naturally generous warm hearted woman’ (2003, p. 230).

Marriage
At the end of 1935 Ted returned to Adelaide to marry Bertha and take her to a new life in the desert. Few people understood her marriage to this difficult, self-absorbed man (Crawley 2004, p. 8). It appeared to her friends that she was walking away into the desert and into a world that was exclusively his. In a sense, she was turning away from her friends and family, both physically and geographically. Her son John reflected on this saying, ‘I think she was more or less universally condemned by all for marrying TG (sic), mostly because he had a German background, but also because he was a difficulty personality and made people feel inadequate’ (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 3).

Bertha married Ted at St Cuthbert’s Church, Prospect at 7.45 pm on Saturday 21 December 1935. Their wedding was reported in the society pages of the Adelaide Advertiser, entitled ‘Gown of Albino Skin for Tonight’s Bride’ with a detailed description of Bertha’s gown and bridal veil (December, 1935). Photographs of her wedding day show her looking beautiful, and Ted, sombre and handsome. Her stepmother and her bridesmaid Clare wore wide-brimmed straw hats and each carried flowers in autumn tones that matched their dresses. The wedding was a society event and the article included a professional photo of Bertha taken in the Paramount studios in Adelaide with Bertha as a debutante (1935). Three short weeks later the Strehlows left for Central Australia, travelling north on the Ghan train line.
The final section of this rail line, between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, had only been completed in 1929. Following this, it was the major route of travel to Central Australia, opening up the Centre to tourists and as the main route for the movement of foodstuffs and building materials from Adelaide to the north (Powell 2009, p. 124). The journey for the newlyweds took two days and the hot weather grew increasingly uncomfortable. The dry and dusty conditions Bertha experienced when travelling to Alice Springs were due to the drought that had lasted from 1925 to 1934. The experience was ingrained in Bertha, with the details still clear to her 45 years later when she told Ted’s biographer of her shock at the extreme weather conditions which made her think she’d come to another country (McNally 1981, p. 44).

Bertha and Ted arrived in Alice Springs on 18 February 1936 and stayed in the town for just three days. During this time, they met the nursing sisters at the Australian Inland Mission Hostel and purchased supplies, staying with friends of Ted’s before they were taken by truck to Hermannsburg (Strehlow, B 1955). Ted wrote in his diary: ‘It was a hot day, with such a dense dust haze that visibility ceased about three miles on both sides of the track…hence it was a most uninteresting drive to Hermannsburg’ (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 2). The journey of fifty-five miles took over four hours through the heat and dust on an unsealed track. Bertha had thrown her lot in with Ted with great enthusiasm. She wrote that she was looking forward to a new and exciting life, describing how ‘…the idea of living as a nomad for some months presented itself as a great adventure’ (1940, p. 9).

Despite being deeply in love, Bertha and Ted may have had different motives for marrying. While Bertha was stepping into adventure in the Centre of Australia through her marriage to Ted, he was keen to gain recognition in the mainstream Adelaide establishment by his union with her. Her family was not wealthy, but very well connected in Adelaide (Strehlow, J 2011, p. 48). Although the affection and love appears to be genuine at the outset, it was also a strategic marriage. Ted had written in his student diaries, while still at the University of Adelaide, about his need to find a suitable wife. Hill refers to the many women Ted expressed an interest in within these diaries. Indeed, before Ted met Bertha, he recorded an anxiety that he would not be able to find someone who would be ‘his alone’ (Hill 2003, pp. 122–3, 237–8). Later, he recorded in his diary his distress at the prospect of losing Bertha through the traumas of the camel trek. He writes ‘I felt cold, and fear gripped my throat, so that I could scarcely gulp…I foresaw the death of my wife’ (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 44).
He writes about the fear of having to face the scorn of his acquaintances and having to face the loss of his position as Patrol Officer should Bertha not survive the trek (Strehlow, TGH 1936 Field Diary; Strehlow, B 1936, p. 4).

While the landscape, the people and the languages of Central Australia were new to Bertha, she was also experiencing another side to her husband. For here, in Central Australia, Ted was returning home. Bertha had read some of his field diaries and seen the photos he had taken on early research trips, so she already had a sense of the place she was coming to. She also had a great deal of compassion for the work he was doing and believed in him completely (McNally 1981, pp. 43–4). Ted was brimming with confidence following his regular treks to Central Australia from 1932 onwards for his university research. His Aranda, unpractised since childhood, was much improved by 1936 and he had reconnected with old friends from Hermannsburg (Strehlow, TGH 1932). While travelling widely across Central Australia over the previous three years he spent months at a time camping out with his Aboriginal childhood friend Tom Ljonga, who was also Ted’s camel handler (Henson 1992, p. 75). Ted’s background, his stories and knowledge of Central Australia informed Bertha’s life completely as she immersed herself in this world. Ted was in many ways the quintessential bushman character, and he was her guide through these new experiences of the bush (Galt-Smith 2002, p. 205).

The effects of the drought were still devastatingly evident when Bertha arrived at Hermannsburg in 1936 (Gammage 2011, p. 48; Henson 1992, pp. 86–7). Ted’s photographs of Central Australia and the long discussions the young couple had early in their relationship would have prepared Bertha in some ways for the desert, but the reality of arriving in Hermannsburg would have been a cultural and physical shock for her. Despite this, Bertha’s ‘can do’ attitude meant she was able to quickly settle into the daily routine, much of which held the same domestic demands she would have experienced as a young wife living in Adelaide. While Ted began preparations for the research journey that would take them across the south-west of the Northern Territory, Bertha was in charge of cooking, washing and cleaning in their new home. Bertha did have help. The missionaries at Hermannsburg, Pastor and Mrs Albrecht, offered Bertha domestic assistance from an Aranda woman, Ruth, to help her with these daily chores. So it seems what was also different in her new life was also strangely familiar. Bertha knew no Aranda or German and had to learn how to
communicate in simple English with Ruth and the other women who helped in the house (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 2; Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 2).

**Preparing for the trek**

After living at the Hermannsburg Mission for four months, Ted and Bertha were anxious to get moving (Strehlow TGH 1936, 5 June). The hospitality of the Albrechts and the other missionaries at Hermannsburg was appreciated, but the ideal time for travel was during the winter months, and the season was well on its way. The Strehlows had arrived in Hermannsburg in February, hoping to be quickly on the move, but in May they were still waiting for several more camels from Walter Smith who was the policeman stationed in Alice Springs (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 21). These delays created anxiety but also gave them a period of time in a relatively settled place before their long journey began. While still at Hermannsburg, the couple took the time to explore the area, with long walks along the Finke River as well as practice treks to Palm Valley and Jay Creek to help Bertha become accustomed to the rigors of camping (Strehlow TGH 1936, 10 May).

After waiting for additional camels, by the time Bertha and Ted eventually set out on their journey by camel across the desert in 1936, they had spent a great deal of time undertaking extensive preparations at Hermannsburg. Bertha explains ‘We hoped to make the trip in seven weeks, but had to allow sufficient food for 10 weeks in case there should be delays’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 32). Ted felt confident about the forthcoming journey because of the knowledge he had gained from his previous research treks.

While at Macumba Station in the north of South Australia, they learnt they had to change their plans for the trek. These changes resulted in them having to travel a much greater distance into extremely remote and isolated areas. While being well prepared in a practical sense, and Ted’s knowledge of the landscape and bush skills, they were poorly prepared in a medical sense. Despite the change in travel plans, Ted continued to rely solely on himself and his knowledge of the country and the languages around him, with Bertha relying solely on his expertise for any emergencies that might arise. They had little knowledge of the possible problems that might arise on the journey in the likely event that Bertha was to become pregnant. For Bertha, as the only woman, the trek was particularly isolating. There is no evidence the couple knew anything of birthing issues from either side of their union, and Bertha
had no mother to ask. Her stepmother hadn’t had children and her father was not likely to have talked to Bertha about her own mother’s experiences surrounding her birth (Crawley 1986). However, in a letter to Ted written early in their journey, Bertha’s father implores Ted not to ‘take any risks’ (James, G 1936, 13 July). The long, even strokes of his handwriting across the page are like a sign of his careful concern and one could speculate that he knew something of the risks that Bertha was facing if she were to become pregnant.

As the youngest child, Ted knew nothing of his mother Frieda’s experience of pregnancy or childbirth. His knowledge of the role and expectations of women was based on Frieda being an extremely capable and competent helpmate to his missionary father. His other experience of women during his boyhood was of the Aboriginal women helpers who raised him and worked in the house with his mother, cooking and cleaning and maintaining order. All these capable, practical women kept their cultural practices around pregnancy and childbirth completely private (Issacs 1987, p. 210; Vaarzon-Morel 2006, p. 15).

In John Strehlow’s comprehensive study on the life of his grandparents Frieda and Carl Strehlow, *The Story of Frieda Keysser*, he addresses the silence around the work of Frieda Strehlow at Hermannsburg at the end of the 19th century, which he proposes was effective in turning around the high infant-mortality rate that was threatening the Aboriginal population (Strehlow, J 2011, p. 734). There is no evidence that Ted knew anything of the life-saving work Frieda had achieved with mothers and babies in the area and by the time Ted was growing up in Hermannsburg the population numbers turned around and were steadily increasing.

Bertha had no women to advise her, and the magazines and books, such as *A Book for Everywoman* (Blythe 1924, pp. 13 & 77), available to women in the 1930s, suggested childbirth and rearing were a natural process, all achieved through a positive, God-fearing attitude to life (Eveline 2001, p. 165). Such an attitude and a trust in the natural processes of procreation were promoted as the way to achieve a successful marriage (Summers 1975, p. 386). Further, even though Bertha was a modern woman with an education and a career, it was expected she would give up her work to be with Ted. Summers discusses the complexity in the role of women in the first part of the 20th century with the conflict between career and motherhood:
The educated woman who, perhaps after a short period of pursuing a career, renounced all to become a wife and mother was deemed to have successfully carried out her ‘highest’ vocation… (1975, p. 329)

These are attitudes Bertha was likely to have held herself, and understandably so, as she wanted to be with her young husband so early in their marriage (McNally 1981, p. 44). The country was in the grip of the Great Depression and women’s roles were changing again following the ‘Great War’, and they had to move out of employment to give jobs back to the returning soldiers. Married women in particular, ‘had paid jobs… [but] did not see them as permanent’ (Summers 1975, p. 411). Government policies confirm social attitudes of the time with married women not being able to continue their employment in the public service, a barrier which was not lifted until 1967 (Eveline 2001, p. 164).

The journey west
Bertha and Ted’s journey through the south and the west of Central Australia9 began with joy and energy. They started out on 5 June 1936, and both Bertha and Ted recount a sense of anticipation and excitement in their writing (Strehlow, B 1945 & Strehlow, TGH 1936). Their party included three Aboriginal camel handlers – Tom Longa, George and Witchetty – and eleven camels. The cold frosts of winter had set in but the days were clear and sunny. They moved through a rich landscape, and fresh water flowed in the Finke River as they followed it south through the vast waves of rock of the James Ranges. As the Finke River led the party away from the Hermannsburg Mission towards Palm Valley, Bertha recorded ‘…for miles and miles we travelled through rocky gorges, and passed large open waters the size of small lakes’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 32). For Bertha and Ted, leaving Hermannsburg meant they were starting their great adventure following in ancient footsteps through the Finke River, and there was a strong sense that they were claiming this journey for themselves, the river a metaphor for the beginning of their life together.

Soon though, there was a change of tone in Ted’s writing as he recounts the violent historical events that took place in that part of the country, ‘… [it was] a place of peace and undisturbed serene beauty; but like many other seeming Edens on earth,
it had known its full share of man’s cruelty and viciousness’ (p. 35). The party reached an area called Irbmangkara (‘Running Waters’) on the Finke River, and Ted recalled the shocking events that had occurred there before white people came to Central Australia. Ted recounts in his diaries:

…the last great rally of the Northern, Southern, Western Aranda took place within view of the stony cliffs where the River sources take a plunge to the south: all is stillness now – silence, oblivion, the beauty of death broods over the clear waters of Irbamaykara [sic]. (8 June 1936)

The story of the massacre is in stark contrast to the wonder of their location. Years later Ted wrote in detail of this in his book Journey to Horseshoe Bend where he recounts the deaths of up to a hundred men, women and children, clubbed to death by a rival clan (Strehlow, TGH 1969, pp. 35–9; Latz 2014, pp. 14–5). In contrast to Ted’s dramatic writing style, Bertha writes in her ever-practical language of the condition of the land. Once they left the beauty and protection of the James Range behind, she writes of their hope to see ‘large open waters once more’ (1945, p. 33). It is as if, at this stage at least, Bertha can look over the land with a long, clear vision, while Ted sees into it.

They followed the Finke River for another two days and arrived at Horseshoe Bend Station, another place of death and loss. It was at this cattle station in 1922, that Ted’s father Carl Strehlow had died. The journey then took them south to Macumba Station, close to the rail siding town of Oodnadatta in the north of South Australia (Strehlow Research Centre 2004, Appendix). At Macumba Station, they had several days rest to purchase supplies and make repairs to the camel packs. One of the camels Ted called ‘Jumper’ had a sore on its flank infected with maggots, and Ted wrote in his diary that the wounds needed treating with kerosene (Strehlow, TGH 1936, p. 21). Ted and Bertha had mail waiting for them at Macumba, which they read and answered with enthusiasm as the contact with their family helped them feel less isolated. Included among the personal letters was information for Ted from the Commonwealth Government regarding his new appointment as Patrol Officer. He was instructed he had been released from his research and instead was to investigate an ‘allegation of the shooting of aborigines (sic) by the Cuslack Hemmerston Expedition in the Petermann Ranges near Ayers Rock, some 400 miles away’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 31). This news was a blow to Ted, as he wanted to continue the research he’d commenced in 1935 before he and Bertha were married. After a few
days resting at Macumba Station, they repacked their camel boxes, stocked up on supplies that were running low and, grateful they had brought extra provisions, headed off (Hill 2003, p. 241).

The camel party retraced their steps north into the Northern Territory and then headed west at Charlotte Waters, but as is clear from Ted’s diary, Bertha was soon pregnant and all was not well. Instead of being filled with joy at the pregnancy, Ted writes:

My wife and I felt very depressed yesterday and today. We know now that we can expect an heir in due time – if everything goes well, what are we to do? Shall we risk a camel trip for my wife? Her nausea is rather disturbing. (19 July 1936)

Despite this entry by Ted, there doesn’t seem to be any discussion about Bertha staying at Macumba and catching the train from Oodnadatta, either back to Alice Springs or, as a safer option, to Adelaide to stay with her parents. There is silence in the narrative on the subject of her pregnancy, with only the ‘difficulties’ involved with it being recorded by Ted when the pregnancy threatened to disrupt the trip. Indeed, throughout Bertha’s published accounts of the trip, she does not mention her pregnancy, her debilitating morning sickness, or her miscarriage at the base of Mt Bowley in the Petermann Ranges at all. Instead, her writing is matter of fact, with more concern expressed for the devastatingly dry conditions of the country, and for the welfare of the Aboriginal people living with such hardship, than for any problems she herself was experiencing. As mentioned above, her writing was intensely practical, but with an interest in the changing landscape and an attention to detail. Bertha wrote in her 1945 paper that she and Ted had a particular interest in the geological structures and the condition of the country (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 33).

As she recounted her experience of the journey, Bertha’s writing is reminiscent of that of other white travellers seeing the country of Central Australia for the first time, with the focus not on the self but rather on the immensity of the landscape and the practical events that consumed the daily life of travellers. Bertha recounted a mixture of surprise and awe similar to that of writers such as Arthur Groom when he saw Ormiston Gorge, and marvelled at ‘the colours of Ellery River…and Palm Valley…I had seen them at sunrise and sunset…but the colours and shadows of the Ormiston had their own incredible power and depth’ (1950). Her writing also reflects that of Robyn Davidson when she saw Uluru for the first time,
many years after Bertha – ‘I could not believe the blue form was real…it floated and mesmerised and shimmered’ (1986, p. 134).

The journey west took the party through thick mulga scrub, about which Bertha remarked, ‘In places we found it difficult to proceed because the mulga scrub was so dense that the team could scarcely force its way through’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 36). While traversing 10-metre-high sand dunes, Bertha records the landmarks around them, detailing the shadowy shapes of the Musgrove Ranges to the south and the distant purple of Ayers Rock (Uluru) and The Olgas (Kata Tjuta) to the north. At the Petermann Ranges, after travelling for over 1000 kilometres, they had reached their destination, and she writes:

We had gone there [to the Petermanns] in order that my husband could make investigations among the natives, and we had hoped to see hundreds of the Petermann people travelling over the reserve. Instead, we found that the reserve was practically empty. (1945, p. 41)

Bertha expressed concern at the dry conditions and the low population of Aboriginal people in the area. She says: ‘Most of the land that once belonged to the natives is now leased to pastoralists, and only a few areas have been set aside for the aborigines’ (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 46). In their writing, both she and Ted expressed that they were witness to the destruction of culture and country from the impact of white contact in Central Australia (Strehlow, TGH 1936, pp. 30–5).

Conclusion
For Bertha, the intensity of the experience of being in Central Australia, physically and emotionally, began in earnest after she and Ted had left Macumba Station in South Australia, and the party were on the 400 mile trek west towards the Petermann Ranges (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 31). She was pregnant and very ill with morning sickness by this time, but continued on with the journey, showing incredible resilience. It didn’t occur to Bertha to be doubtful or tentative in the country. Instead, she strode through the land with absolute trust. She never publically documented her miscarriage and her grave illness in this vast and ancient place. It is Bertha’s ‘sureness’ that is the subject of Giving voice to silence. The political, social and economic conditions of postcolonial Central Australia and the impact these conditions had on Bertha, Ted and the lives of the Aboriginal people around them are explored in the next chapter.
Chapter III

Central Australia – a historical overview

The land’s voice is silence.
Introduction

The Central Australia Ted and Bertha were coming into had a violent colonial history. The influences of government policy impacted the lives of Aboriginal people and were to impact Ted and Bertha in their daily lives as they lived and worked among Aboriginal people. Through scholarly research and an intimate knowledge of the country, I aim to explore some of the complex concepts of Aboriginal cultural beliefs and land ownership.

The background and contextual information of the social history and commonly held mores of the day give insight into the impact of the government policies that controlled the lives of Aboriginal people. Further, the attitude of white settlers to the country they felt entitled to would also impact the experience Bertha and Ted had in Central Australia. Using Bertha’s writing on the subject as a guide informs both my creative and exegetical work. Her writing highlights the direct impact these policies and attitudes had on her and Ted when they lived at Jay Creek for six years.

As I explore the history of Central Australia I am aware that Bertha lived in the desert at a time of turmoil, with the resultant change and difficulty. The years 1936 to 1942, when Bertha lived in the Centre, straddled the end of the Great Depression and the start of the Second World War. These years have been described as the ““mean” decade’, with the entire country facing food shortages and high rates of unemployment (Robertson 1985, p. 415). The pastoral industry in Central Australia was struggling for viability and there was reluctance by governments at both state and federal levels to spend money on the Northern Territory, as there was little economic return (Powell 2009, p. 124).

Through white eyes¹⁰

Bertha arrived in Central Australia when the region was going through a time of major change. Despite still being extremely isolated, the Centre was no longer the remote frontier it had been. The arrival of the railway line in Alice Springs from Oodnadatta in 1929 had in many ways ended the era of extreme isolation for the region and with the limitations and cost of travel being reduced, more settlers and travellers from other parts of Australia now considered the Centre as a place to

The inland and north of Australia, the so-called ‘frontier’, in a spatial sense, ...has been places where optimistic non-indigenous assessments of land have been subject to regular appraisal and debate. They are also areas where the treatment and status of indigenous people have remained significant social and political issues, and where national and regional conflicts over indigenous land ownership and title have been most focused. (2005, p. 67).

Before the turn of the 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th, Central Australia was still viewed as the last frontier, a place for exploration and exploitation. Indeed, when describing the idea of ‘the frontier’, book reviewer Geordie Williamson revisited Xavier Herbert’s ground-breaking novel *Capricornia*, written in 1938. He says ‘...by naming and peopling the world of Capricornia – exhaustively chronicling the Top End’s distinctness in terms both geographic and mythopoetic – [Herbert] summoned a new Australian region into the public imagination’ (2012, p. 43). Despite being regarded as racist literature by today’s standards, Herbert’s writing at the time placed a previously invisible group of people in the North of the country into the psyche of the nation. This ‘naming’ of the frontier and the desert in literature is explored by Roslynn Hayes (1998) where she examines work such as Tom Cole’s *Hell West and Crooked* (1998), Daisy Bates’s *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1944), *The Red Centre* (HH Finlayson 1935) and *I Saw a Strange Land* (Arthur Groom 1950). These books and others gave the wider Australian population a picture of the remote Centre and North, albeit with a somewhat ‘wild west’ slant (Dewer 1997, p. 3). The placement of outback stories into the minds of a previously unaware population in the south of the continent created a new awareness about the ‘bush’ (Griffiths 1996, p. 176).

The completion of the Overland Telegraph line in 1872, which connected Darwin and Adelaide, had slowly brought about a change in the ‘frontier attitude’ towards Central Australia (Kimber 1991, p. 2). Harris writes that although the worst of the killings of Aboriginal people was over, life had irretrievably altered for the people of the Centre. He gives a bleak summary of the era:

By the end of the [19th] century the frontier, in its worst manifestations, had passed through Aranda land and was now further north...the Aboriginal population had been drastically reduced and the remainder lacked the will and the numbers to continue any serious resistance. White townships and cattle
stations were now a permanent part of the environment. Many of the old Aranda people were now dead and a new generation of people did not know a world which was not dominated by settlers, police and missionaries. (1990, p. 404)

Harris is writing specifically about the impact of the settlers on the lives of the Aranda people of Central Australia, focusing on Aranda interactions with the Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg, and the impact of the mission and Christianity. Contrary to his assertion that Aboriginal people ‘lacked the will’, resistance from Aboriginal groups was common and continued into the 20th century (Kimber 1991, p. 6). With Aboriginal groups having reduced access to traditional waters, and cattlemen expanding their reach throughout the Territory, there were attacks and reprisals. The response to this was the government policy of ‘supervision and control’, a euphemistic term for providing protection for the white settlers on the frontier by shooting Aboriginal people. One such massacre occurred at a waterhole on Coniston Station in 1928 where it is thought over 200 people were killed (Gray 2011, p. 55; Reynolds 1998, pp. 192–3). The tokenistic government investigation into the massacre and the subsequent finding that ‘...the killings were...justified’ created a sensation in the southern media (Vaarzon-Morel 2006, p. 44). The news of the Coniston Massacre demonstrated to those in the south of the country that the Centre was still at the margins. As a young woman in Adelaide, Bertha would possibly have been aware of the reports of massacres and the ill treatment of Aboriginal people.

It was as if the arrival of the railway was another part of the wave of change across the Centre, as the railway enabled work and opportunities for white settlers from the south with a sense of adventure. The numbers of white people in the town of Alice Springs grew dramatically in this period. In 1927 the town had a permanent white population of around 40 people. By 1939, when Bertha and Ted had been living at Jay Creek for two years, the white population in the town of Alice Springs had grown to around 950 (Markus 1990, p. 24; Powell 2009, p. 129). Tim Rowse writes of the perception of the town and attitudes towards Aboriginal people during the years of early settlement:

It was very dear to one strand of the colonising imagination that Alice Springs could be conceived [of] as an island of civility surrounded by more or less uninstructed Indigenous people, a people deserving of management and
tutelage, by missionaries and pastoralists, until they were fit to enter and use the town. (1998, p. 6)

The growth in population and increase in white activity and a fascination for Central Australia was also driven by a growing anthropological interest in Aboriginal people. Henry Reynolds discusses the prevailing attitude of the era, writing that ‘[a]scendant evolutionary theory suggested that the Aborigines were destined to be driven to imminent extinction by the iron laws of evolution’ (2012, p. xxi). Scientists and amateur ethnographers were in a hurry to visit Central Australia to carry out research on the groups of Aboriginal people in the Centre who were thought to be disappearing (Bolton 1985, p. 498; Harris 1990, pp. 26 & 382, and Bell 2009, pp. 26–7). In his book *Nowhere People* (2005), Reynolds explores the assumption that Aboriginal people were dying out. He exposes the deep level of control government officials had over the lives of Aboriginal people through the enforcing of legislation (2005, p. 121), with the pervading attitudes towards Aboriginal people being expressed in a newspaper article published in 1888: ‘The pure aboriginals…will be kept until the end of their days: but the opinion of the board is that in the course of a very few years the whole of them will have passed away’ (Chesterman & Galligan 1997, p. 16).

Frequently noted in the literature (Harris 1990, pp. 385–9; Gray 2011, p. 55) are the destructive effects of introduced disease on Aboriginal populations, but more accurately described is the assessment of the devastating combined effects of colonisation and government policies. Franklin & White (1991) described this as a ‘Three-pronged attack’ on Aboriginal health, which included introduced diseases, the loss of ancestral lands, and the herding of Aboriginal people into small reserves and settlements (p. 5). Further, the active destruction of the Aboriginal population was carried out by police under the auspice of the government; as Harris states, ‘[c]oncerted police action, largely unreported, “made the country safe” within a year’ (1990, p. 386). Diane Bell explores the behaviour of those in authority, behaviour which contributed to severe reductions in the Aboriginal population. She writes that ‘…punitive parties massacred groups indiscriminately while rescue “pacification” parties brought people in from the desert’ (1995, pp. 41–2).

Haynes suggests anthropological publications at the time reinforced the early century view that Aboriginal people were an unchanging people in a ‘sleeping’
continent waiting to be woken up by British rule. She comments, ‘[this] not only allowed Aborigines to be cast as non-threatening but, by a sleight-of-hand transfer of their characteristics to their predominantly desert habitat, reinforced the British rights to the continent’ (1998 p. 5).

This commonly held belief is found in much of the literature throughout the 20th century. The 1966 book *The Australians*, which celebrates a country of great innovations and future promise, reveals a pervasive racist view implying Aboriginal people were part of the ‘stillness’. For example:

‘He [sic] did not wake up the sleeping land, but he multiplied and wandered and found his own myth in the great quietness, and for thousands of years he, too, was undisturbed…yet his possession was tenuous, precarious in the huge sprawl of the place, and he was tolerated by the land because he asked so little of it. (Johnston 1966, p. 13)

The colonial position regarding the management of Aboriginal people is explored in a recent publication by British academic Tom Lawson in his book *The Last Man*. Lawson posits that the genocide of groups of Aboriginal people in Australia early in the 19th century (in Tasmania, in particular) reinforced the British colonial idea of racial superiority and influenced its colonial attitude the world over (2014). Lawson’s work challenges the long prevailing idea that ‘…the Empire was overall a benign force in the world’ (Reynolds 2014, p. 11). Rather, Lawson suggests that the presumed disappearance of the Tasmanians led to colonial assumptions that ‘…the process of evolution was both operative and demonstrable…that “primitive” peoples were passing away while “advanced” ones were ascending and destined to bestride the world’ (2014, p. 11). The superiority of the ‘white’ way of life, through the introduction of religion and ‘civilisation’, was the view that continued throughout Bertha’s time in Central Australia, one that went unquestioned and unchallenged by all but a very few people.

**Hermannsburg Mission**

As early as 1867 the Lutheran Church established a mission with the Dieri people on a section of Coopers Creek near Lake Eyre in South Australia. They saw their role as bringing Christianity to the ignorant, and believed they would succeed by learning the local language and translating the bible into Dieri (Wilson 1994, pp. 21–3). They achieved much in a short period of time but the consequences of white contact had a
devastating impact, resulting in the Dieri contracting diseases such as measles, gonorrhea and syphilis. These illnesses caused death and infertility in the population, and by 1875 there were so few Dieri to minister to, a decision was made by the Lutheran Immanuel Synod in Adelaide to move the mission to the banks of the Finke River, 130 kilometres west of Alice Springs (Harris 1990 p. 390–1). It was named ‘Hermannsburg’ after the college in Germany where the missionaries had trained (Austin-Broos 2009, p. 27). The primary focus remained bringing Christ to the ‘heathens’, but the missionaries were also running a sheep and cattle station, as well as educating and feeding the population.

Essential to ministering to the population was the learning of the local language, and as early as 1879 missionary Herman Kempe had an Aranda language word list of 20 pages printed in Adelaide after he’d been in Hermannsburg for just two years (Latz 2014, p. 30). As well as their primary mission to convert the Aranda to Christianity, the missionaries were anxious to control the venereal diseases that continued to devastate Aboriginal populations across Central Australia at the turn of the century. In 1894 Frieda Strehlow joined her young husband Carl Strehlow in Hermannsburg and they began their 28-year missionary service working together with the local Aranda people. The health status of the Aboriginal women and children became of particular interest to Frieda, and her focus was to have a significant impact on tackling these diseases, which helped reduce the decline in the Aboriginal population (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 70; Latz 2014, p. 78).

The recording of Aboriginal myths and legends became of interest to Lutheran missionaries who were among the first religious groups to live and work with Aboriginal people in Central Australia. While government and other religious groups in Australia argued over the fate of Aboriginal people and the perceived problems created in their ‘management’, the work of the Lutherans is notable. They went against popular sentiment and believed that Aboriginal people, like all people, needed ‘saving’. The church’s role was to ‘…carry on mission work among those heathens…for they are our neighbours, and if we do not have pity on them and endeavour to help them to life through the holy gospel of Jesus Christ, they [will]…be lost’ (Lohe 1977, p. 7). As language learning and documentation was a major focus of the Lutheran missionary philosophy, their Bible translation work and the acknowledgement of the culture they were working within set them apart from the other church groups and indeed the wider society (Harris 1990, p. 400).
The Bungalow

With the increasing numbers of white settlers moving into more remote areas of Australia, and the resulting sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women (Markus 1990), anxiety grew among government officials and administrators about the increasing population of ‘half-caste children’ and how they were to be managed (Ling 2011, p. 131; Reynolds 2005, p. 156). Legislation was passed in Queensland, Western Australia and then South Australia, which ‘…provided the structure for the management of Aboriginal affairs’ (Reynolds 2005, pp. 133–4). When the Northern Territory came under the control of the Commonwealth Government in 1911, it also adopted these laws Following the introduction of the Aborigines Act of 1910, a series of laws came into being that controlled the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and increased the powers of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Dr Ceil Cook who was in this role from 1927 to 1939, the period that covered the first three years of Bertha and Ted’s time in Central Australia. Cook had wide-ranging powers and could ‘…prohibit whites and Asians from entering Aboriginal camps; …take any Aborigine or half-caste into custody; and he became legal guardian of every Aboriginal child under the age of eighteen years’ (Powell 2009, p. 117).

This Act was an example of the prevailing attitude towards Aboriginal people and demonstrated the commitment to the White Australia policy, which Cook stated is ‘something that all Australians regard as sacrosanct. All States, all political parties are united in an ardent desire to maintain racial purity’ (quoted in Reynolds 2005, p. 161). In response to the growing fear that the half-caste population would overtake the white population in the Northern Territory, policies to remove children were enacted. These policies impacted on the lives of many thousands of Aboriginal children taken from their parents, children who in later years would become known as the ‘Stolen Generation’ (Sheppard in Barnes 2000, p. v). Rowena MacDonald wrote of the effect of this policy in Between Two Worlds:

Dr Cook believed that the best way to prevent such problems [the rise in the Aboriginal ‘half-caste’ population] was to eventually eradicate the part-descent population. He thought this could be achieved by removing part-descent girls from Aboriginal camps and educating them to a standard which would allow them to marry white men. (1995 p. 20)
One of the outcomes of these policies was the establishment of facilities to place children of mixed descent. One such place, ‘The Bungalow’, was established in Alice Springs in 1921; here, 51 ‘half-caste’ children lived in a tin shed at the back of the Stuart Arms Hotel (Markus 1990, pp. 23–92). The living conditions were extremely poor, with no running water and limited sanitation. Visiting journalists in 1924 reported on the appalling conditions, describing the home as ‘an institution which must make everyone who sees it burn with indignation’ (Markus 1990, p. 26). This bad press in the southern states led the Northern Territory administration to consider another location for the home, and it took another four years for the Bungalow to be moved to Jay Creek, 45 kilometres to the west of Alice Springs (Markus 1990).

But the promised changes didn’t eventuate and the conditions at Jay Creek were also reported as deplorable, with ongoing problems with the water supply and a general lack of facilities. In 1932 the children were moved again, this time on foot, to the Old Telegraph Station just north of Alice Springs where again conditions were poor. The manager at the home from 1929 to 1934, Mr Freeman, was later charged with the sexual assault of a number of girls. These poor conditions continued despite government assurances that ‘when the Telegraph Station is reconditioned the unsatisfactory conditions which have existed for a long period will disappear and the half castes will be afforded the care, attention and proper housing…’ (Blakely quoted in Markus 1990, p. 35). The Bungalow continued as a home for ‘half-caste’ children with a focus on the ‘...“assimilationist” and systemic’ governance of Aboriginal people up until the 1960s when it was closed (Rowse 1998, p. 7). The residents of the Bungalow were subsequently relocated to Amoonguna, a settlement on the edge of Alice Springs (1998, p. 199). When Bertha and Ted moved to Jay Creek in December 1936, they were faced not only with creating a new living space among the ruined buildings of The Bungalow and its lack of an adequate water supply, but also with its bleak history.

**Aboriginal view of place**

Despite the conflict created by the numbers of explorers who travelled through Central Australia in the late 19th century, their impact on traditional Aboriginal life was minimal because they tended to travel through the country and leave again (James 2009, p. 25). But the spread of pastoralists throughout Central Australia in the
1920s and 1930s alienated the Indigenous population from traditional waterholes (Bell 1993, p. 69; Lyon & Parsons 1989, pp. 7–10). This, coupled with years of drought, caused a catastrophic disruption to traditional life, as Aboriginal people had to compete with the increasing numbers of cattle for water. With the loss of access to traditional waterholes and the effects of the drought on food sources, more people moved closer to white settlements and missions to get rations (Layton 1986, pp. 62–3). Conflict over land use was to become a flashpoint between settlers and Aboriginal people as the settlers assumed ownership, supported by government policy and administered by police (Powell 2009, p. 131).

There was little recognition or understanding by white settlers or explorers that land was already inscribed, mapped with the stories of the Aboriginal ancestors. Various texts describing the dreaming stories and legends – including Ted Strehlow’s *The Songs of Central Australia* (1971), *The Arunta* (Spencer & Gillen 1927) and more recently *The Arrernte Landscape of Alice Springs* (Brooks 1991) – speak of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ with the land (Gill 2005, p. 78). In recent years work by creative writers and academics has explored Aboriginal ways of ‘seeing’ the landscape, which has led to more attempts to address this in literature. Authors who have a deep understanding of Central Australia such as Margaret K Turner (2010), Jo Dutton (2013), Philip McLaren (2010), Hans Katakaringa (2010), Alexis Wright (2011), Kim Scott (2011), Paddy Roe (1983), Brenda Saunders (2012) and Craig San Roche (2002) are all writers who are currently exploring ‘place’ as a spiritual experience. Jungian academic David Tacey explains that ‘[l]andscape is at the centre of everything: at once the source of life, the origin of the tribe…the intelligent force that drives the individual and creates society’ (2009, p. 145). Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose writes of an understanding of Aboriginal ‘ways of seeing’:

Country is multidimensional: it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreaming, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins in a future: it exists both in and through time. Humans were created for each country, and human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country. (2004, p. 153)

The years of white contact with Aboriginal people in Central Australia have brought unparalleled catastrophe. Anthropologist Diane Bell writes that ‘[f]rom the Aboriginal view, the past century of white intrusion into the land of their ancestors
was one of dispossession, violence and disruption’ (1993, p. 4). The subsequent loss of culture that was precipitated by the invasion of Aboriginal lands became an obsession for Ted Strehlow. He wrote boldly about his fear of the inevitable denigration of the Aranda way of life, and was criticised in both Aboriginal and white societies for this (Jones 2002, pp. 2 & 3). Part of the criticism of Ted’s approach relates to who has the right to speak about Aboriginal culture. He was criticised for saying that real Aboriginal culture had been ‘destroyed’ (Austin-Broos 2009, p. 30). Further, ‘[h]e [Ted] seems never to have understood that the doomed romanticism of his position was itself destructive of those things he wanted to conserve’ (Edmond 2013, p. 131). Ted had no doubt about his own rights, regardless of whether he upset people or whether people thought he had the right to speak.

The issue of the representation of speaking about Aboriginal issues was taken up by historian Bain Attwood who questioned the validity of historical texts which explain Aboriginal language and culture, because they are inevitably written through a ‘white lens’ (2005). He writes, ‘[h]istorians…have to rely on texts created by white people. We never have Aboriginal voices [in history] unless white people recount (and invariably reformulate) these in their writings’ (2005, pp. 159–60). Attwood is supported by Bell who agrees that ‘…the written history was a celebration of the arrogance and chauvinism of the late nineteenth and twentieth century society’ (1993, p. 41). With Ted’s propensity for saying what he thought, he was often not popular with those in authority. Indeed, Paul Carter suggests that even though Ted had the knowledge, he lacked the skills to advocate for Aboriginal people (1996, p. 23). But Bertha’s calm and practical manner in response to Ted’s frustrations appeared to ameliorate him, and her quiet confidence and belief in his ability and authority usually shifted his negative focus (Strehlow, B 1936, p. 4; 1945–1955, Letters to Ted).

**Erasure**

The process of dispossession and repossession that occurred with the colonisation of Central Australia had the effect of wearing away the country as it came under the ‘ownership’ of white settlers. The result of this is that the recent past becomes obscured (Gill 2005, p. 68). This overlaying of history occurred with the land and also with language. Anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos explains that the inability of the early missionaries at Hermannsburg to accurately ‘hear’ and learn the Aranda words for places led to the renaming of locations very early on. She writes: ‘the lack of a felt
need to learn the names has caused significant erasure’ (2009, p. 45). From the time of
the arrival of the missionaries and white settlers into Central Australia everything
became a contested space. Gradually less was known and remembered; soon the
memory of places, people’s names, and all that was familiar to Aboriginal people
appeared to be wiped clean. The fact that it is Aboriginal land was forgotten. Carter
described this process whereby ‘…the landscape is metaphysically as well as
physically stripped, here and there silenced, bleached of sense…infolded and invisible
to the European eye’ (1996, p. 36).

Although he was often in conflict with those in authority, Ted Strehlow worked
with Bertha to bring an Aboriginal viewpoint to the attention of mainstream Australia
(Hill 2003). His life’s work strongly involved efforts to counter the outright dismissal
of Aboriginal people as the first Australians. He felt he had the right to speak for
Aboriginal people because of his background growing up at Hermannsburg. This led
him to assert that his upbringing made him different to all other Australians, and led
him to believe he was unique – a white man who understood Aboriginal people (2003,
p. 98). He believed that Aboriginal traditions and beliefs, that included chants, dancing
and stories, were equivalent to literary output and thus should stand alongside the
Western literary traditions. Further, Ted felt he was the one to reveal and champion
this to the contemporary world. Carter writes:

And [it is as] if as Strehlow [TGH] thought, these new forms of writing must
arise out of a synthesis of indigenous and foreign poetic modes, then to tell
one’s own life differently might be to help inaugurate a post-colonial policy –
and literature – where the past is not a foreign country but the ground beneath
one’s feet. (1996, p. 25)

It was the impact of this belief that drove his life and was a major influence on his
work. This passion is what Bertha first saw in Ted and was attracted to. It was a
blessing in the early years of their relationship, and a curse in later years when it
destroyed their marriage.

More recent literature has challenged colonial accounts of the assumed passive
acceptance of Aboriginal people of the movement of white people into Central
Australia. Historians, for example, Richard Kimber, and others, have done much to
redress this misrepresentation of Aboriginal reactions to ‘settlement’ by writing about
the Black Wars, which occurred in the 1880s and the ongoing resistance to pastoral
such as *Warlpiri Women’s Voices* by Aboriginal women (1999) recount stories about the Aboriginal resistance, some of these oral accounts recalling events from when the women were young girls. The impact of white settlement in Central Australia is now being acknowledged after many years of denial and little understanding of the reality of contact history. The works of Aboriginal elders such as Yami Lester (1993), Kathleen Wallace (2009), Margaret K Turner (2010), Alexis Wright (1997) and Wenton Rubunjta (2002) bring into the mainstream a verbal and written history of Aboriginal people. These writings are generating a new and much needed vitality to the retelling of Central Australian history and are crucial, as they are not told through a ‘white lens’.

Non-Aboriginal historians and commentators write openly about the conflict created by the presence of white settlers on Aboriginal lands. These admissions are a part of the collective retelling of history acknowledge both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories. Paul Carter explores the concept of entry into ‘foreign land’ for white settlers, where they look for something familiar in the landscape, something they recognise. Carter wrote of explorer Mitchell describing the country as being like ‘British fields’ (1996, p. 329). Such expression of country demonstrates the need for explorers and white settlers who moved through and settled parts of the country to name it as ‘familiar’ (Gill 2005, p. 67). By naming it as familiar, other settlers would be able to imagine it and would come to inhabit it. The land then, in the eyes of the white settler, came to be viewed as having a recognisable economic value. Much has been written about the movement of explorers and white settlers across the remote parts of Australia through the 19th and early 20th centuries. The work of historian Tim Rowse in *White Flour White Power* explores the impact of government policies on Aboriginal people, especially as they relate to the change in lifestyle from a nomadic to a sedentary existence with a greater reliance on welfare (1998). Ann McGrath’s work complements this as she examines the contribution made by Aboriginal people in the growth and development of the pastoral industry in *Born in the Cattle* (McGrath 1987). And Amanda Dowd’s ‘Finding the Fish’ tackles the depth of the psychological impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people into the present day and the resultant destructive effect on cultural life, which has led to shameful statistics in illness and early death in Aboriginal populations. She writes:

In spite of changes in both government policy and public perceptions, third world conditions are still found in remote communities and in town camps
around Alice Springs, and people are still dying too soon from violence, suicide, petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse, liver and kidney damage, child abuse and domestic violence. Education, housing and employment remain vexed issues. This continues to be a national shame. (2011, p. 128)

Dowd’s work sums up the issues faced by Aboriginal people, which, 50 years earlier, Ted and Bertha were raising awareness about. As I read of Bertha’s experiences in Central Australia, it became clear that she and Ted were in general support of the policies of the government that focused on Aboriginal people. She remained convinced the activities of the government that closely scrutinised the lives of Aboriginal people, such as the ‘Register of…wards of the state’ as described by Edmond, were for the best (2013, p. 287). So despite Ted’s antagonism to those in authority, Bertha smoothed over his anxieties, helping him to work within the system.

**Conclusion**

Aboriginal voices have historically been recorded like an altered echo, with white writers placing their own interpretations on Aboriginal knowledge and understanding of country. Their voices are often filtered through the values of the translator in many publications, resulting in the ownership of the work often becoming that of the translator rather than the storyteller (Hamilton & Llewellyn 1986 p. 11). Tim Rowse explores this problem:

> Historical enquiry can reveal the fragility of the knowledges on which all parties to the frontier have based their actions towards the Other, and such inquiry must become self-conscious about the provisional status of its own inferences about motives, interests and understanding. Aboriginal understandings, interests and motives have their own opaque history which requires careful and tentative reconstruction, using evidence that is not as easy to assemble as that which tells us the basis of settler action. (1990, p. 154)

The inner and outer aspects of Aboriginal people’s lives have been imagined by the white people around them, recorded and reported in history through a white lens and thus interpreted in such a light (Attwood, 2005). Bertha contributed to the ‘white lens’ of Aboriginal history in her writing on the living conditions of Aboriginal people. She expressed concern that Aboriginal people were being marginalised because their productive lands, hunting areas and waterholes were being used to raise cattle. The station owners had the backing of the government and Aboriginal people were forced
to stay in reserves that had no water or game (1945, p. 47). Bertha’s writing, though well meaning, does, however, display a commonly held misunderstanding that Aboriginal people would inhabit particular parts of land rather than moving through country for hunting, ceremonial and seasonal journeys (Morrison 2013). This is evident when Bertha writes that ‘[t]here are no longer so very many natives in the Territory, and they do not require much land, but they do need some country and it should be good country’ (1945, p. 47). Her misunderstanding may appear odd to the contemporary reader who is sensitised to Indigenous culture, especially in the light of the in-depth knowledge her husband Ted had of traditional Aranda culture and law, but it does demonstrate the depth of the gulf between Aboriginal and Western thinking (San Roche 2002, p. 30; Gill 1998, p. 19).

It is possible that both Ted and Bertha, despite their placement in Central Australia and Ted’s background knowledge of Aboriginal society, still could not comprehend that the land was alive, a living entity and a physical representation of history, story and survival. There is a growing appreciation of this in more recent times, acknowledged and explored with the publication of works as disparate as Hans Katakariña’s poem ‘The Pain Rains’ (2010, pp. 4–7) and Debra Bird Rose’s Reports from the Wild Country (2004, p. 153). Nevertheless this fundamental misunderstanding persists today, and, along with an erasure in the memory of Australians, demonstrates the need for an accessible narrative in literature (Tacey 2009, p. 65). Work in a variety of genres, from poetry to non-fiction, can assist a wider Australian audience to gain a better understanding of the importance of the healing of people and the land.
Chapter IV
Women, feminism and the desert

What is forgotten, the confusions and the silences, is as important as what is remembered.
Introduction

The literature exploring the experiences of women in 1930s Central Australia provided by Cole, Haskin and Paisley (2005, p. xxv), McGrath (1995, p. 43) and Marcus (2005, p. 72) reveals the level of control over women’s lives exercised by the social and political constraints of the time. This control dominated them financially, physically and sexually, effectively silencing their voices. Feminist writer Adrienne Rich speaks of women’s historical role as being:

a luxury for man…[they] served as the painter’s model and the poet’s muse, but also as comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant and copier of manuscripts. (1980, p. 36)

This domination was presided over by men, whether via government policy or closer to home where husbands were enacting these patriarchal systems. Men were the history recorders, and for the most part the history makers of the time. Interestingly, Australian feminists of this era, such as Jessie Street, while campaigning for equal rights for women, also focused on the importance of “motherhood as a service to the state” (Eveline 2001, pp. 156–8). This followed with the expectation of society and the church was that marriage was the ‘natural’ state for women, and in years following the First World War and the Depression, white women were expected to have children to ‘grow the nation’ (Bongiorno 2012, p. 196). These views often included the assumption of male authority over women, and the belief that there was a ‘natural order’ in the hierarchy of society with white men at the top and black women at the bottom (Bishop 2008, p. 232). Further white men viewed the availability of Aboriginal women as their reward for being in remote places, isolated from white society (Rowse 1990). This social structure created problems for Aboriginal men, in many cases leaving them with very few marriage prospects as cultural practices broke down and Aboriginal women were ‘unavailable’ for traditional marriage (Gray 2011, p. 71). Policies of segregation and assimilation were reinforced by government legislation and enforced by police and patrol officers (Powell 2009; Markus 1990).
Women and postcolonial Central Australia

In the 1930s Central Australia was developing from the era of the ‘unexplored’ outback and moving forward into the era of frontier and exploitation. Historian Tom Griffiths comments:

After the Great War, outback isolation began to break down and the Australian inland was perceived more as a frontier of settlement and less as a howling wilderness. (1996, p.176)

Despite the idea that the Centre was less isolated, the frontier remained the domain of white men – missionaries, government workers and station owners. The outback still suited those with a sense of adventure and was, for the most part, more attractive to white males than their wives. It has been suggested by Central Australian historian Richard Kimber that as early as 1885 there was a change in the ‘wildness’ of the outback with the introduction of white women to the bush (1991, p. 18). Regardless of this assertion, the population of white women remained low for the next 30 years. Griffiths (1996, pp. 190–1) reviewed the literature of the era and found that that the low numbers of white women were blamed for the rise of the ‘half-caste’ population. White women were accused of ‘staying away’ from the frontier, leaving white men to the ‘temptations’ of black women (1996, p. 188). The assumption was that white men had no say in their own behaviour and that the ‘use’ of Aboriginal women was a right of the bushman (Dewer 1992, p. 6). As stated by Griffiths:

Not only were they unavailable when frontier men needed them, but those who lived in comfortable suburban settings were wilfully squandering the opportunities to procreation. (1996, p. 188)

Even though there were positive black/white relationships, they were viewed negatively (Issacs 1995, p. 182), with the result of these relationships – the ‘half-caste children’ – reacted to with horror. Implicit in this response was that there was something wrong with ‘mixed-race’ relationships, with an assumption that these relationships were abusive (Marcus 2005, p. 77) and that the children wouldn’t have a place in either white or Aboriginal society (Griffiths 1996, p. 188).

Social constraints, fully articulated or not, influenced and controlled the behaviour of women. There were mixed assumptions about white outback women; it was considered that as a group they were strong, the stuff of legend – as in Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drovers Wife’ (1971, pp. 59–67) – but as individuals they were weak,
their femaleness being their downfall (Summers 1975, pp. 357–8). Visual artist Kim Mahood (2000) grew up on a remote cattle station in 1940s and recalls the white women around her:

…[they] fell into two categories, the active and the passive. The passive ones seemed on the whole more content. I cannot tell in retrospect if they were happier. What I do remember is that men were responsible for most of the unhappiness of women. This seemed to be a given, accepted by everyone. (pp. 106–7)

Settler men preferred to leave their wives in the cities and towns of the south until ‘the hut was built’, the geographical and social isolation deemed too extreme until ‘civilising changes’ (Gill 2005, p. 73) were made to the landscape. The arrival of more and more white women through the mid to late 1930s was seen as a civilising influence in itself. In discussing the role of white women in frontier societies like Central Australia, researchers Cole, Haskin and Paisley (2005) comment:

White men had conquered the ‘frontier’[but] they would need ‘properly’ domestic white women in order to remake themselves as ‘settler’. Such women were seen as crucial in the modernisation of both white and black populations as the post-frontier settler nation took shape during the first half of last century. (p. xxv)

An examination of Northern Territory literature that has contributed to the romanticised myth of the frontier, academic and historian Micky Dewar, researched the attitudes towards women historically. She notes, “White women, when they are mentioned in adult literature, are frequently depicted in the role of guardians of order and social reform” (Dewar 1997, p. 133). The ‘civilising’ influence of white women is also part of the frontier myth which in some ways is a pervading stereotype of women being content with their “natural” role of wife, mother and homemaker (Summers 1975, p. 462).

**Advocate for Aboriginal Rights**

Bertha was one of very few white women in the years between the wars living among Aboriginal people. Despite the closeness of living conditions at Jay Creek, a strict social structure was adhered to (Radke 2014, personal com). Bertha had women helping her in the tent and then in the house but she never became fluent in Aranda (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 2). Despite this, she clearly felt Aboriginal people were not
getting a fair deal with the government policies. This is evident in the language she uses when she writes of her and Ted relying on the services of Aboriginal people to help with her survival. For example, Bertha expresses the concerns she experienced while on the camel trip across the desert:

We had to have the collaboration of the natives, and on this occasion, as at all other times during our life in Central Australia, the dark people proved themselves our faithful and willing friends. Over and over again these people help the white man [sic], either in his daily work or when he undertakes some exceptional travel, as in this case, and yet they receive so little in return. (1945, p. 46)

The results of their work, Ted's writing and Bertha's editing, are contained in Ted's recording of Aboriginal creation stories. In later years, when Ted was justifying his desertion of Bertha and their children, he criticised Bertha's editing of his work saying she never really understood what she was reading and this is what led him away from her. As Ted attempted to explain his own existence and beliefs in relation to his birthplace Hermannsburg (Strehlow, TGH 1971), he saw an increasing separateness between himself and Bertha despite her unflagging support for him (Strehlow, B letters to Ted 1945–1960). It was as if her silence in the texts she edited led him to accuse her of not contributing to them.

Yet Ted's intense involvement with Aboriginal men, especially the Aranda men he grew up with at Hermannsburg, had a significant effect on Bertha’s observations in her writing, especially those of Aboriginal women. She writes:

One woman I remember very well. She carried herself erect, balancing a deep *pitji* from the bark of a tree on her head, another *pitji* was tucked under one arm, some rabbits she had killed were slung over her shoulder and under the other arm she held her youngest child. (1940, p. 33)

Bertha was very aware of the hardships Aboriginal women faced at the hands of Aboriginal and white men, and on this subject her attitude at times differed from Ted's. The process of editing Ted's writings had a dual effect on Bertha. Having both travelled through the landscape and experienced trauma there as well, she was cognisant of the difficulties faced by women in Central Australia. In this way Bertha's experiences of womanhood were always inextricably connected 'between memory,
landscape and the sacred’ (Jacobson 2009, pp. 184–5). But as she edited Ted's work, and indeed as she wrote about her own experiences, she actively suppressed the personal effects the experience had on her (1945, 1940).

In her writing Bertha expresses concern at the treatment of Aboriginal people at the hands of pastoralists and the government. She reveals an understanding of the effects the loss of traditional lands will have. She writes ‘...only a few areas have been set aside for the aborigines (sic)...[i]n most cases it is not the best land...’ (1945, p. 47).

Bertha operated within the constraints of her era and her faith, expressing Christian concern not only in her writing but also in her actions, despite her writing appearing to be condescending (Barnes 2002, p. 151–3). Her recounts differ from those of more contemporary travellers in Central Australia such as Robyn Davidson. Davidson’s memoir *Tracks* reflects on her experiences of walking with four camels and her dog from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean on the Western Australian coast at Dampier (1986). Davidson’s book recounts her walking with Aboriginal elder Eddie from Docker River in the Northern Territory to Warburton in Western Australia. She travelled much of the journey alone but writes that her time with Eddie, as an elder leading her through the country, was healing for her (pp. 161–86). This area – the south-western part of the Northern Territory – was the same country Bertha journeyed through some 40 years earlier and, like Bertha, this experience gave Davidson a rare understanding of the landscape as being a living entity,

Despite some similarity in the themes of their stories of isolation, identity and an emerging understanding of the land, there is nothing in Davidson’s text to demonstrate she was aware of another woman having made a similar journey. One of the major differences of the two women’s experiences was the distinct separateness of Bertha from Aboriginal men. Even though they were the journey guides at times, they were also very much seen as ‘workers’, ‘camel boys’ and ‘interpreters’ who worked exclusively with Ted (Strehlow, B 1945; Strehlow, TGH 1936). It is difficult to make direct comparisons between Bertha’s and Robyn Davidson’s journeys because of the different era and circumstances. Despite this, there are interesting parallels with both women who were advocates for Aboriginal rights, as well as risking their lives as they travelled with camels across thousands of miles of desert (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 47; Davidson 1986, pp. 122–4). Historian Fiona Paisley’s writings focus on the
contribution of a number of Australian white women in the interwar years of 1919 to 1939, who she describes as feminists by the nature of their work among Aboriginal women and children (2000). Women such as Annie Locke, Daisy Bates and Mary Bennett were active in raising funds through church groups, or like Bertha, they worked directly with Aboriginal people in reserves, camps or on missions. Others were involved from interstate in women’s politics and raising awareness about Aboriginal rights (2000, p. 20). For many their overriding concern was to protect Aboriginal women from the growing number of white men moving into remote areas. Their work often meant applying Christian morality and protestant work-ethic principles, being what Anne Summers describes as ‘God’s Police’, in the fight for Aboriginal rights (1975, p. 462). Others, such as Constance Ternent Cooke, were active outside Central Australia spreading the news overseas of the plight of Aboriginal women at the hands of white men (Paisley 2005, pp. 172–96).

Olive Pink (1884–1975) was one such woman, an anthropologist and activist for Aboriginal rights who was living and working in Alice Springs at the same time as Bertha. It would have been difficult for Bertha to befriend Pink as Ted frequently discounted and damned her for her lack of professional qualifications (Marcus 2002, pp. 4–5), and like many other single feminists active at the time, Pink was quickly dismissed by those in authority, being accused of having inappropriate relations with Aboriginal men (Paisley 2000, p. 32). The movement of feminist activism to promote Aboriginal rights appears not to have impacted on Bertha as her loyalties remained in defence of her husband (Crawley, 1986, pp. 36–7).

Interestingly, another woman who worked as a strong advocate for Aboriginal women was Bertha’s mother-in-law Frieda Strehlow. There are parallels between Frieda and Bertha, as two women whose contribution to their husband’s life work has gone largely unnoticed (Crawley 2004, p. 107). Frieda Strehlow was like many pioneering women who worked to make their home in the bush (Strehlow, J 2011). She suffered the physical effects of six pregnancies and 28 years of hard work at Hermannsburg Mission. After the death of her husband at Horseshoe Bend Station on the Finke River in 1922 (Strehlow, TGH 1969), Frieda moved to Adelaide with Ted and continued working for the church. She was committed to missionary work and her Christian Lutheran values drove her to remain in the church, but it was her poverty and her need to support her youngest son that kept her in Adelaide for so many years. When, in 1931, she felt Ted was well-established at Adelaide University,
she left Australia for the last time, going ‘home’ to Germany. She had arrived in Australia in 1894 some 36 years earlier, and she was finally to be reunited with the children she left in Germany in 1910. She only met Bertha once, years later when Bertha travelled to Europe, but the affection between the two is evident in their letters (Strehlow, F 1936 & Strehlow, B 1936).

Gaps and silences
Like Frieda was for Carl, Bertha was all these things for Ted. He might have been her reason for being in the desert, but she was invaluable to him. Barry Hill’s biography of Ted notes the important role Bertha played in the development of Ted’s career in Central Australia. Hill writes of when she and Ted moved to Jay Creek to establish the Aboriginal Reserve in 1937, the year following their trek across the desert. He says ‘[s]he helped her husband in every way, especially with the children, the elderly and the sick. She was matron, nurse, housekeeper and wife’ (Hill 2003, p. 307).

Bertha’s traumatic introduction to the desert during the camel trek didn’t appear to quell her enthusiasm for life in such a remote place. Once she was restored to health again after their return to Hermannsburg, she established herself as a staunch supporter of her husband’s work, determined to make the most of the adventure. As the years passed, she smoothed over the problems he created with his financial backers and supporters, enabling his work to continue. She typed up his letters, and refined his wording, to improve his opportunities for continued funding and support from universities. She was a close reader and editor of his research throughout their marriage, before and after the children were born, and she edited the early versions of his epic Songs of Central Australia (1971) which was not published until many years later.

Bertha’s perspective and attitude to the country she lived in was always going to be seen through the slant of her own cultural background. She did, however, glean a unique insight into the country by reading Ted’s work on Aboriginal mythology and ownership (McNally 1981, pp. 42–3). Even though Ted was from a similar cultural background to Bertha, I have argued that his upbringing gave him a different perceptive to the majority of white people of the day. In this way, she was ideally placed to be able to write about the country and her experiences with Aboriginal people. Thus, even though the writing of place usually reflects the writer’s cultural knowledge, Bertha’s writing is imbued with rich experience of Central Australia.
In her writing Bertha has the opportunity to present this new history, which up until her time of writing was gender dominated and frontier focused. I am, in turn, able to draw on Bertha’s writing of Central Australia to inform my writing of her narrative, to present yet another more textured history.

**Place as homemaking**

Place is a powerful and vital theme in Bertha’s story. The setting of Central Australia behaves like a character in its own right, and is at times a life-threatening backdrop to her experience. When Bertha Strehlow left Adelaide in December 1935 to live in Central Australia with her husband, she stepped into a place in history held by few white women. She travelled through deserts, and watched the sun rising on Kata Tjuta and Uluru, knowing she was probably the first white woman to see these things. Despite this, in a paper to the Geographical Society Conference (1945, pp. 31–48), she depicts an image of country in language consistent with the thinking of the day: ‘…yet it was a desolate place. The building was set down in the midst of a windswept gibber plain, which was almost totally barren’ (p. 32).

Jay Arthur (2003) in her exploration of how language has historically influenced attitudes to place, documents that colonialists consistently viewed the country and landscape in terms of an English perceptive (2003, pp. 1–3). The English countryside was the default comparison in thinking for settlers, explorers and visitors to Central Australia. These fertile green images were in stark contrast to the Australian landscape, which was viewed as dry, barren and empty. Bertha, who moved from her home in Adelaide to Central Australia at the end of a 10-year drought, uses this language throughout her writing. Issues of water access and availability are consistent topics as she reports on empty lakes and salty, undrinkable springs (Strehlow, B 1945, pp. 38, 40). The weather was also a major influence on Bertha’s attitude to the country, especially as she and Ted travelled by camel across the desert. She was exposed to the elements daily and, being extremely fair, needed to cover herself regularly with creams, hats, scarves and long-sleeved clothing (Strehlow, J 2004, p. 1).

Ross Gibson, quoted in Deborah Rose Bird’s *Nourishing Terrains* (1996, p. 18) comments on the ‘English’ imaging of country: ‘Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, and inscribed into an elaborate and all engrossing
national history’. Further to this, Patrick O’Connor mirrors Gibson’s observations when speaking about the layering of history in Ireland:

the landscape is thoroughly humanised. It is therefore imbued with cultural meaning, being the concrete expression of the states of mind, now and in the past, and just like a book or a parchment much written upon and written over, its interpretation awaits the discerning reader… (1992, p. 8)

In Europe then, the country is written over by the people and in Central Australia the people are written over by the country.

Historian Katie Holmes writes of the desire for white settlers to change the environment, thus creating a sense of belonging when moving into a new place. For women moving into an unfamiliar landscape at the beginning of the 20th century, gardening became a way to increase this sense of belonging: ‘Through gardening… women deepened their attachment to place, they made and inscribed their home, and reshaped the world around them’ (2011, pp. 4–5). Nicholas Gill proposes that the drive to change and mark the land comes from a wider context of colonialism that was part of the late 19th century ‘European expansionism’, as he explains:

The wilderness landscape is essentially unformed, chaotic, innocent and uninhabited. Classically, the garden is a step towards culture. It is the crucible of domestic life and the active transformation of the earth for human ends…(2005, p. 79)

For Bertha this ‘inscribing’ came about after the camel trek was over, when she and Ted moved to Jay Creek and set up an Aboriginal reserve where the Bungalow children’s home had been from 1928 to 1932. It had a history of misery and deprivation, but Ted did not refer to its former use in his numerous submissions to government when requesting to use Jay Creek as an Aboriginal Reserve (Henson 1992, p. 115). Ted and Bertha lived in a tent for two years while building their house as the Bungalow buildings were derelict and had to be pulled down. Like every white settler in Central Australia before her, for Bertha the making of a garden was more than the practical need for fresh vegetables; it was the desire for a sense of ownership over a small patch of land. This was a place of safety and rough comfort for Bertha, and a base for Ted between his expeditions. Bertha wrote warmly of living in the tent, as if the fragile walls kept out the extremes of the desert (Hill 2003, p. 307).

In exploring relationship to place, Bertha Strehlow was, as with all white people in Central Australia, an alien presence, a visitor. Around the time Bertha came
to live in Central Australia, novelist Eleanor Dark was writing her epic trilogy *The Timeless Land* (1941–1953), depicting the birth of the Australian nation. Although Dark’s work was looking at the earlier convict and settler colony of Sydney, the sentiment of ‘belonging’ has parallels to the experience of white people arriving in Central Australia a century later. Dark writes of the experience of belonging, of people trying to belong but ultimately experiencing alienation:

They dreamed their various dreams of a contact, a relationship, a union with [the land] – to use it, to know it, to impose a pattern on it, or merely share its space and its tranquility; to sow and reap, to explore, to govern, to merely live with it. There was pain in the slow adjustment of their sense, effort in the attunement of their ears and the re-focussing of their eyes, a struggle between nostalgia for an old, and craving for a new abiding place. (1948, p. 295)

The desire to write and understand the impact of contact history is evident in the work of Dark. This sense of ‘disconnect’ experienced by white settlers, missionaries and miners, as they moved into previously ‘unsettled’ areas of remote Australia was often overcome by a sense of industry. The establishment of the ‘familiar’ was achieved through hard work and the building of stockyards, homesteads and water tanks. Ted, frustrated by the lack of money and support from government sources, set to work making bricks for his and Bertha’s house with the help of Aboriginal workers.

Paul Carter (1996, p. 25) writes of the process of writing history, place and exploring characters to make a new history:

This process of bringing places ‘into being’ dissolves the distinction between autobiography and history; to affiliate successfully to the new environment was to be initiated into a new history, but also envisage different ways of telling history.

But the experience of landscape and country was alien for Bertha, with no landmarks to recognise, no links to memory or lived event within the landscape, and for Bertha writing of this time is as much as a challenge as it was for me trying to reconstruct her. The writer Liam Davidson explores the fact that memory itself is not enough to develop a story, neither is landscape, but he says, the development of narrative can become possible positively or negatively through fiction; ‘[i]t…operates as a sort of perceptual history of place in which the stories carried by landscape connect or fail to connect with the personal landscapes we carry with us’ (1999, p.
The imprinted memories of our childhood landscape can drive our attitudes and perceptions of country and place (Haynes 1998, p. 1). As the majority of Australians live along the coastlines of the continent, the perception of the Centre grows as myth in the psyche (Tacey 2009, p. 59).

Familiarity with a landscape gives a sense of ownership and a sense of safety. Writing from memory can place us back into the landscape. Writing in the first person, I act as Bertha’s memory and draw from this memory that sits in the writings she left from her time in the desert.

**Conclusion**

Bertha is present in the history of 1930s Central Australia but the many gaps in knowledge and written evidence of her are represented by a historical silence. This has led me to explore Bertha’s story and to try to write biography through the senses of sight, sound and touch. There are challenges in this approach, especially in the stories of women where so little might have been recorded. As stated by Kon-yu, ‘…researching and writing about women in the past is fraught with difficulties…As a result I have learnt to work with the silences, omissions’ (2010). The writer will inevitably arrive at a point of acceptance that not all the information is available and, rather than this being negative, it becomes a positive place of creativity. Kon-yu calls this acceptance ‘resolving to write a type of truth’ (2010). Thus, the known historical facts – the ‘markers’ – need something else around them to create a story, a narrative that will fill the picture. A way of doing this is to use the contextual history to ‘grow up’ the narrative.

Described by Gill as ‘storytracking’ (1998, pp. 38–9), the role of the storyteller/historian is one of growing the narrative into completeness. He writes that ‘[s]torytracking constructs meanings on relationships, encounters and experience of self and others…From the perspective of any given storytrack, one “sees” the rest of the world’, and although drawn from the personal, this is a type of truth.

This then, is where my own journey becomes part of this storytracking concept. The next chapter will explore my relationship with the specific country that Bertha travelled through and how writing Bertha’s story in place has helped to develop my relationship with her.
Chapter V

The writing of landscape as a personal journal

Then try, like some first human being to say what you see and experience and love and lose, describe your sorrows...passing thoughts, your belief in anything beautiful. Describe all that with fervent, quiet, and humble sincerity, and use...the things in your surroundings, the scenes of your dreams and the subjects of your memory.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a young Poet (2000, p. 11)
Introduction

As previously stated, *Giving voice to silence* uses Deleuze’s theoretical framework of the book of the soul. This concept also informs my relationship with Bertha. I have been guided by her recorded experiences in letters and published papers; I can intimate the tone of her writing in the verse novel and allow my own writing to reflect hers. So our work becomes intertwined, with Bertha’s prose and my poetry combining to create a verse novel.

This chapter explores how this intertwining has occurred in the writing process, especially through my use of journalling as a practice. Journalling during long trips to remote locations has been fundamental in the generation of the poetry I have written for this research. In addition, the research process and my writing have been stimulated by reading a wide array of poetry and verse novels and books and articles on Central Australian history. My local knowledge of Central Australia from living and working in the region for 29 years has contributed to the creative process through my recognition of and familiarity with the country in Bertha’s account of her journey.

Writing the landscape as a journal

To place Bertha in the landscape, I first had to spend time in remote locations to write myself into the landscape. For me, the writing of place and landscape is also the writing of the ‘self’ immersed in place. My practice is supported by a deep knowledge of place through both the lived experience and historical research. Memory, history, photographs and maps all become part of the writing, because they are all part of the experience of living in Central Australia. When I spend extended periods of time in the bush of Central Australia, the external landscape becomes a metaphor for my internal landscape as a writer.

The shape of the country, the passing clouds, the lie of the land and its changing colours through the day, these are all tropes which represent the internal space (Henderson 2012). In the writing of these landscaped-based images, the poet is coming into knowledge while simultaneously being a recorder of dreamscapes – something that is in the mind, as well as the physical environment (Cooke 2012, p. 17).

Journalling the landscape has long been the practice of travellers and explorers to Central Australia, and their writing has made the landscape more ‘palatable’ for
other settlers who followed (Sturt 1847; Spencer & Gillen 1899; Carter 1987). For these largely white travellers to Central Australia were looking for the familiar – points of reference that resonated in the landscape (U’Ren 2014). The metaphysical internalisation of the experience of journalling the travel results in a retelling and a rewriting of the experience as the writer records it in their journal over and over again. In her paper on the benefits of journalling in creative writing research, Eugen Bacon writes ‘… the journal is more than an instrument for whimsical entry…[which] informs the mapping of self and research‘ (Bacon 2014, p. 1). Like Bacon I have found that with each rewriting of my journal, a new depth of creativity is reached (Bacon 2014, p. 1). Even though I may see an unfamiliar part of the landscape, it becomes filtered through my mental images of ‘known’ landmarks. In some ways this enables me, as the writer, to make a claim on the landscape because I start to view it as familiar (Carter 1987).

**Personal journalling**

Having lived in Central Australia for 30 years, I was able to bring my history and knowledge of the place into the writing of Bertha’s story and my lived experience becomes hers to some extent. After being in Central Australia for this length of time, the lens through which I see the world is informed by the desert, made up of red sand and dust. This is expressed in the poem ‘In search of mint’:

I only know that world is clearer
seen from here,
when I leave I can’t see the desert anymore
and am afraid
(Shilton 2009, p. 116).

Further, on several occasions throughout the course of writing this thesis I travelled to remote parts of Central Australia, especially to the west and south of Alice Springs, the same part of the country Bertha travelled in. These trips involved first gaining permission to enter Aboriginal Lands from the Central Lands Council (CLC) and secondly by gaining permission from the community of Kaltukatjara (Docker River) the traditional owners whose land I was visiting. This is the usual requirement for anyone travelling on Aboriginal Lands in the Northern Territory, in accordance with the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act (1976). The
distances I covered were between 700 and 1000 kilometres, and the journey into the Petermann Ranges required travel in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

The primary reason of travelling into the desert for me was to be ‘in country’, which quite simply means travelling to a place where it is possible to camp for a number of days. Throughout these trips, the process of regular journalling was fundamental to the creation of my work. The writing process I engage in on location is a style of ‘informed’ stream-of-conscious writing, a practice taught by Melbourne playwright, director and drama teacher Jenny Kemp (2008). Beginning involved in this practice allowed me to engage in the generation of new writing without the constrains of my own internal editor.

This generative writing process follows a great deal of research in the form of immersion into Bertha’s articles (1940, 1945 & 1949), her letters to Ted (1935–1960), and letters to Frieda and others (1936), a process suggested by poet Jan Owen (Magee 2009). Research for the project included reading the work of many poets, some of whom have work based in Central Australia, but also other poets I am drawn to. This reading enables a type of freedom in the writing, a technique noted by other poets (Goldberg 1990, pp. 1–7). For example, when interviewed by academic Paul Magee, poet Jenny Harrison said, ‘I research by reading other poets’ (2009, p. 3). The combination of my immersion in the poetry of others and being ‘in country’ contributes to my poetry because I, and thus my poetry, am ‘present’, more than just physically, in place. This is achieved by observing the impact of place on the senses, a writing practice which focuses the work on concrete imagery. Focusing the writing on the senses sight, sound, touch and taste has enabled the poetry to be grounded both in place and history, especially as the narrative becomes more surreal as Bertha’s physical state becomes increasingly precarious.

As Bertha’s experiences on the camel trek of 1936 become more and more dire, to the point where she is facing death in the desert, the poems demonstrate that the two experiences of country, mine and Bertha’s, and our voices mingle. In the creative work this is expressed most clearly with the poem ‘If I speak from under the earth’ (2015, p. 61). This is a metaphysical poem where Bertha’s relationship with the landscape changes. As she is facing death her response to the desert transcends the physical:

I speak from under the earth, the desert a red beast over me. History is layers of time on my voice; broken sand, dust air and cloud blur. The
sky pushes into me until the life I had before this moment dries up, gone on hot wind… (Shilton 2015 p. 61)

The presentation in ‘prose poem’ format, the only one in the whole creative work of 79 poems, provides it with a demanding physical arrangement on the page for the reader as a metaphor for Bertha’s experience of the solidness of the earth, as she does when at her most vulnerable.

The dreamlike and surreal concepts explored in this prose poem link to ideas explored by Jungian academic, Amanda Dowd. Dowd observes that for Australia to develop and grow, the nation needs to understand the subconscious importance of the landscape (2011). This awareness is what Dowd describes as an understanding of the ‘saturation of meaning’, which Aboriginal people identify as being within the storied landscape (2011, p. 126). The exploration of this concept is fundamental to Bertha’s story, because, despite being written about and explored in greater depth in recent times, knowledge of storied landscape is still mostly restricted to Aboriginal Australia (Wright 2011, pp. 234–5).

Sacredness
For Bertha many of the events on the camel trek were different from anything she had experienced before. One such event, recorded by Ted in his diaries, occurred when Bertha and Ted were deep in the Petermann Ranges with their party (1936, p. 36). Ted writes in some detail that one of the camel handlers named George recognised the footprints of a man he had seen in Alice Springs several months earlier, and the next day they found this man with a larger group of people and camels. This other group was travelling through the Petermann Ranges en route to a station in the north (p. 36). Even though the Petermann Ranges were isolated in many ways, they were also populated with Indigenous people who were travelling through and hunting (Latz 2014, p. 17). As mentioned in Chapter II, 1936 it was a time of drought in this region; the waterholes were low and this affected the numbers of people travelling through the Petermann Ranges area. But despite these drought conditions, the local Aboriginal people visited specific sacred locations throughout the season and conducted cultural activities. Further, as it was a mountainous area, it contained a number of spiritually significant places, hidden within rocky gorges and waterholes which were visited by the traditional owners (James 2009, p. 20; Layton 1986, p. 456).
The concept of sacredness of the landscape is clear to Aboriginal people, as is the idea of telling the stories of the land, in which voice and song are intrinsically linked to place. Such a concept and idea were little known or understood by white travellers in Central Australia. Aboriginal landscape artist, the late Billy Benn Perrurle, said, in explaining what he saw when he painted: ‘I look back with my spirit and see the land before man’ (2010, p. 2). Time and landscape are a continuum, incorporating the present moment as well as all that has passed. Perrurle, who painted his homeland from memory, saw this innately in his landscapes. This is evident in his ‘Artetyerre’ series, where he uses thick textured paint which conjures up the idea of ‘how one might remember a place’ (NG Art Gallery Exhibition catalogue 2010).

My writing arises from my experience living within this landscape and a constant striving to gain an understanding of Aboriginal view of place. The act of writing landscape poetry creates a space to write about ‘a sense of place’ without having to overtly explain the work and its meaning. It results in the reader listening to the resonances in the language which will reflect the sounds of the land. The meaning arises from an understanding that the Australian landscape represents the movement across the land of ancestral beings who created the formations in that landscape as they went. The Central Australian Aboriginal elder and teacher MK Turner explains how she perceives sacredness. She says,

It doesn’t matter where I might be in Australia, I could see the sacredness in this or that Land, and all the sacredness in the members of that Land. I could feel it and I could see it, what is the sacredness in that Land to these (sic) people...that’s how every Aboriginal people sees (sic) every Aboriginal people. Not only seeing, it’s seeing the goodness inside each other. Seeing it, feeling it and really looking inside those people. (2010, p. 7)

Turner’s writing, and indeed her style of language use provides a ‘way in’ for non-Indigenous people to ‘see’ the land and the landscape with new eyes. Greater numbers of Aboriginal writers are exploring this traditional concept through memoir, often expressing the generous sentiment of having written the book as a way of teaching the non-Indigenous population about Aboriginal concepts, beliefs and ideas. This is an acknowledgement that those concepts, beliefs and ideas have been largely ignored for the past 226 years. Discussing the underlying sacredness of the landscape is a sensitive area but it is being tackled in consultation with Aboriginal elders by white academics such as Amanda Dowd (2011) whose work is redressing the lack of
commentary on Aboriginal belief systems. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose also explores Aboriginal belief systems in her writing, and in doing so she also writes extensively of the damage in the land and within Aboriginal communities caused by the colonial and post-colonial disregard for the concepts of sacredness and importance of the land. She says:

The disenchantment of the world happens in many places and context, and it surely happens here [in Australia] where violent ontological discontinuity sunders social and ecological relations as it thrusts its way into time-space and human bodies and spirits, piling up death in the world of the living. (2004, p. 162)

My poetry of Bertha’s story also attempts to convey the sacredness and the importance of the land by showing Bertha in the landscape where she is vulnerable but aware of the life in the land formations.

‘Place’ poets
Australian poets such as Martin Harrison (2008), Meg Mooney (2005), Peter Minter (2000), John Kinsella (2009), Coral Hull (1997) and Emma Lew (2000) have influenced ways of thinking about place. A feature of this writing is immediacy in the language, such as in Lew’s ‘Marshes’:

‘I don’t know the language of this country.
It begins in mists, sombre wild bees
(2000, p. 173)

These poets have developed a reputation for writing that focuses on the impact of the landscape on the senses. Among them and many others is an acknowledgement of the need to bring the concept of the land and its importance into focus. This focus, expressed by Martin Heidegger as a song ‘which names the land over which it sings’ (2001, p. 95), demonstrates an increasing sensitivity and developing appreciation of the sacredness of the land. Australian poets both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are incorporating this sensitivity into their writing as a way of talking about their place (Kinsella 2009, pp. 5–6). The ‘disenchantment’ spoken of by Debra Bird Rose is gradually becoming more commonly acknowledged as non-Indigenous artists and writers express the conscious sense of fracture felt about identity and belonging (2004, p. 162; Tacey 2009, p. 147).
Bertha Strehlow herself showed a great depth of understanding in the importance of the landscape, as expressed in her writing and letters. In 1960 she writes to Ted who is in Central Australia on a research trip: ‘People have come and gone, and those who have remained have changed but the tjurunja11, and their resting place remains the same untouched by time’ (Letter to Ted, 9 July 1960). By discussing the tjurunja in this letter, she was responding to Ted’s joy at being shown the sacred objects intact in a secret location by his Aboriginal guides. Bertha understood the importance for Ted of being shown the sacred stones, and was aware of the significance that they were ‘untouched by time’ because so many of these objects had been taken (including by Ted) and sold off to collectors, in Australia and overseas, in the years since the settlement of Central Australia (Griffiths 1996, p. 176).

Writing setting and character
A strong factor underpinning my interest in Bertha’s story was a familiarity with the setting. The country to the west of Alice Springs is an area of the landscape I know intimately, from the shape of the terrain to the distances and the conditions of the unmade roads. It sits in my mind’s eye as a map. Because of this familiarity, I had a strong sense of Bertha from the outset and could ‘see’ her journey. This is where the writing started as I also had an affinity with Bertha’s experiences of pregnancy and miscarriage, and the issues she faced of geographical isolation. Equally familiar to me is her religious upbringing and her marriage into a missionary experience as I am the daughter of missionaries. While I recognise parallels with some of Bertha’s experiences, I also understood that her experience was hers alone and it was this that I wanted to explore further. The early research I did into Bertha’s experiences inspired me to start writing poems. There was an immediate sense for me of wanting to investigate Bertha’s unknown story. This sense of intrigue I had with Bertha’s story is reflected in the comments of Don DeLillo when he writes, ‘it is the lost history that becomes the detailed weaves of novels’ (1997, p. 8).

Writing about setting was fundamental for the verse novel, the wide landscape of Central Australia creating a delicate backdrop which is a character in itself, always moving and alive with stories. Writing about it impressed on me the past as well as

11 Traditional sacred objects which hold spiritual powers (Strehlow, TGH 1995, p. 38)
the present and for me the poems form layers like the layers of the land. In the process of writing Bertha’s life into poetry, I was strongly influenced by the tone of her own writing. Her voice is especially evident in the long letter she wrote to her mother-in-law, Frieda Strehlow, in December 1936, after her return from the camel trek to the Petermann Ranges (1936, pp. 1–4). I focused on her turns of phrase as I wrote. The poems arose in response to her words, from moments in her writing that spoke strongly in her voice. This writing process echoes Aileen Kelly’s thoughts where she describes the process: ‘– you feel your way through the experience and the words get generated in the process’ (in Magee 2009). On reflection, this is the technique I also employed. Through the writing process, I made decisions about how Bertha’s character would interact with the world of Central Australia and how she would be placed in response to people and the landscape. As the poems emerged, her character was as much imagined, as it was real.

Consistent throughout the work of this thesis is the argument that poetry provides a voice for silences. This concept is supported in the work of poets, such as Adrienne Rich (1980) and Margaret Atwood (2005) among others, who explore the idea of voice in their work. Atwood explores voice in her poetry through what she say is “the melancholy side of the brain” (1995, p. 6). She expresses her dark leaning in the poem ‘A poor woman learns to write: Her face is lined and cracked./ She looks old/older than anything./She’s probably thirty’ (2007, p. 44). Like Atwood, Rich’s explore themes of silence and the politics of speaking out. She writes ‘Silence can be a plan/rigorously executed/…It is a presence /it has a history a form/Do not confuse it /with any kind of absence’ (2012, p. 10). While writing Bertha Strehlow’s story and exploring her place in history, I became more certain that the work had to include her journey into the ‘new’ landscape of Central Australia, a landscape she had very few words to explain or to enable her understanding.

In the midpoint of the verse novel the poems become metaphysical in nature, as Bertha is exploring the spiritual experience entering into the country. Bertha becomes inseparable from the landscape she is in, and thus the land becomes her voice. By way of comparison, the work of Northern Ireland poet Fred Johnston, particularly his poem ‘Song at the end of the world’, explores the idea that he doesn’t have his own voice, but many. In the poem, his persona takes on the role of writing for others and letting them speak through him. His poem places the ‘we’ firmly in the landscape.
Not having a voice of my own
I have many voices…
we are only a breath
of sea, bearing rain
and we will go down into the earth…
(1988, pp. 24–5)

The concept of finding voice becomes a reflective moment in poem, as the poet speaks on behalf of the silent, bringing identity into being through the writing process.

Conclusion
As I journeyed across the desert and recorded my thoughts, impressions and poems, I wrote, trusting that my journal was an integral part of my creative research, even though the outcomes of the writing were unknown (Bacon 2014, p. 3). The practice was an essential part of my work as it enabled me to create Bertha’s poems. As the landscape came into focus for Bertha it was also coming into focus for me. The landscape provided a place for Bertha to speak and my poems can become a way to acknowledge her contribution to the anthropological work Ted was engaged in. The poems also highlight her role in their marriage and they keep her life in focus after he left her. Bertha’s story of survival in the desert, and in the years that followed at Jay Creek and Adelaide, are testament to her strength of character and her determination. Her writing as well as her silence have been the inspiration for this verse novel. The journal I kept while travelling in the Petermann Ranges thus became a starting point for many of the poems in Bertha’s story. Journalling in this way helped me to ‘call up’ the landscape when I was not physically in it anymore and I could recall the colours and smells from memory. The personal aspects of my journey as I travelled in the landscape began to blend with Bertha’s journey and resulted in a sense of freedom as I wrote Bertha’s poems (Ballou 2010, p. 3).
Part B

*Poetry, poetics and the verse novel*
Chapter VI

Poetry and poetics

I want to taste the words on my tongue from the inside of my mouth.

Introduction

This chapter investigates poetics by examining 'the distinguishing features of poetry… its technical resources [and] the nature of its forms' (Hirsch 1999, p. 299). The verse novel as a poetic form is fundamental to Bertha Strehlow’s story, as is the setting of Central Australia, thus there is a need for me to understand how a Western poetic tradition responds and reacts to landscape and an Aboriginal consciousness as revealed in Aboriginal literature. This chapter then proposes that within the ‘sound’ of poetry there are echoes, resonances and vibrations that are also present in the physicality of the Australian landscape. This is evident in the Aboriginal understanding of the land and informs an Aboriginal literary tradition, which includes an oral as well as written tradition (Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 5; Muecke 1983, p. vii–viii). This assertion is analogous with the underlying thesis of my work that proposes that the act of writing the story of Bertha Strehlow in poetry requires placing her in the landscape and this gives her a voice. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is achieved in part through the act of being in the landscape as I am writing Bertha's story. The narrative of the verse novel enacts Bertha experiencing the landscape, as our narratives become entwined and the reader bears witness to her growing awareness of the resonances that arise from the land.

In both a Western literary tradition and an Aboriginal literary tradition, the ‘sound’ of words in the form of songs, chants and the written word constitutes the essence of storytelling as felt at a physical level (Steele 2012, p. 92). This physicality echoes through the writing with the 'timbre' of the author being felt by the reader or the audience (Azul 2011, p. 1). The vibrations in the sounds of words, coupled with the words’ meanings, can provide the reader/listener with a deep understanding of the work and evoke an emotional response to the writing (Oliver 1994, p. 75). An onomatopoetic experience is created through an immersion of the senses, delivering an auditory resonance of words leading to a visual experience. The reader moves from sound to perception, experiencing the essence of place (Carter & Lewis 1999, p. 130). Focusing on the idea of the presence of ‘sound' in the earth, this chapter suggests that a parallel exists between Western and Aboriginal literary traditions, leading to the development of a distinctive form within the Australian poetic tradition, one which highlights the spiritual and physical importance of place (Harrison 2007, pp. 53–4).
Within this development is the writing specifically of country and landscape drawn from the two traditions, which, it is argued here, creates a contemporary ‘voice’ in Australian writing.

The verse novel accompanying this exegesis provides a literal example of writing that is immersed in the land, like water flowing through rock. Placing the story of Bertha Strehlow in the genre of the verse novel demonstrates Bertha’s emerging awareness of the land and the significance of her place within it is revealed through the poetic narrative of her journey. The resonance in each poem exposes layers of narrative as she increasingly identifies with the land. Resonance is a poetic device used throughout the verse novel that unearths metaphorical layering. Each poem then acts as layering ‘beneath the surface of [the] verse novel’, that give rise to the ‘…multiplicity of meanings’ within the work (Jacobson 2009, p. 155).

**A poetic narrative**

Poetry has long been used as a vehicle for storytelling, indeed since stories were first told. From earliest times the rhythms, rhymes and sounds in the language of poetry have held listeners enthralled (Lipton 1991, pp. 4–5), with poetry used as a means of communication and connection, within communities and across time (Winterson 2012, p. 42). The ancient links between poetry and storytelling are acknowledged in the development of oral histories into the written word. The spoken word then becomes a ‘sound’ on the page, with all its poetic beauty.

Inspiration for the creation of art and writing deriving from place, is seen in the poetry of Keats – ‘The Sun, – the Moon, – the Sea…are [all] poetical…’ (1891, p. 184) – and the art of Antoni Tapies – ‘I have striven to feel the depths of my country and also to drink from the sources of our traditions’ (1974, p. 53). Place and landscape are sources of inspiration for the generation of work and the process of sharing in the act of storytelling, explaining the wonders and tragedies of the world to the listener and reader. The role of storytelling is described by American novelist Wallace Stegner, who writes that ‘no place is a place until it has had a poet’ (quoted in Smyth 2014, p. xxxvi). The poet’s affinity with place and sensitivity to the senses can be transferred onto the page.

Poet and academic Jay Parini (2008) writes that the poet’s role is to be mindful of the nature of the art and its distillation in language ‘especially in terms of
language as a kind of echo-chamber in which the origins of words enhance their...denotations and connotations’ (pp. x–xi). Understanding the gulf between ‘mental images and real images, between spirit and nature’ (p. x) allows the poetry to have its own ‘inner logic, an inner necessity of its own’ (Pretty 2001, p. 3). As the reader or listener experiences the poem, the ‘inner logic’ within the poem creates a felt effect which impacts on the senses, giving rise to emotions, and the reader experiences a sense of place through the narrative. Pinsky claims there is ‘a special intimacy to poetry because, in poetry the medium is the audience’s body’, with the impact felt at a spiritual level as the poem is processed and interpreted by the listener or reader (1999, p. 9).

Historically speaking, the journey from the Western writing tradition into an Australian tradition, one that speaks of the land and place with a recognisable ‘Australian’ flavour, had its early development with writers such as CJ Dennis with his work The Sentimental Bloke (1957). Despite the predominately urban setting, at the time the language style of the work was pushing into a new and innovative vernacular, demonstrating the links between the ballad and verse storytelling. Further, writes John Kinsella, this era, ‘compelled a poetry of the land and “Australianness”’, which produced its own shape of poetry, its own rhythms and content' (2009, p. 9). The narrative expressed in this poetry became a popular political and social commentary of the era because of the poem’s ‘ironic treatment of the opposing values of working-class and ruling-class culture’ (Jose 2009, p. 324). A desire to step away from formality and deconstruct ‘standard English’ provided an opportunity for creations by writers wanting to explore a new voice.

The importance of bones¹², and finding names for things
The poet has the opportunity to create nuances in language through the use of metaphor and as the poems develop ‘...meaning of words adds resonance and meaning to the language of the poem’ (Parini 2008, p. x). For example in Emma Lew’s poem ‘Marshes’, her use of the metaphor “noon’s ghosts” evokes a concrete image as well as a mood:

Sky a tent immaculately pitched, and noon’s ghosts are creeping across the paddocks

Arising from a moment in time, this writing is experiential and uses metaphor to create emotion. Further, the writing of historical and biographical stories in poetry can result in layers of meaning (Ballou 2010, p. 2). These layers echo in the unconscious and are reminiscent of the geological layering of the earth over millennia. In poetic terms, as each poem is read, it becomes something experienced physically and something to be unearthed, where meaning can be perceived literally (Jacobson 2009, p. 155).

The literary technique of metaphor used by poets has its roots in a language history that English Literature academic B. Ifor Evans has described as ‘picture-names’ (1944, p. 9). Evans purports that this technique has long been used in English and was fundamental in the development of the language used in such ancient texts as Beowulf. In his text on the history of English literature, published early in the 20th century, he explains: ‘[the poet] uses “picture-names” for the things and people he (sic) has to describe, so the “sea” is the “swan’s road” and the “body” is the “bone-house”’ (1944, p. 8–9). Thus, this technique from an ancient literary tradition continues to be used in contemporary poetry as metaphor. As the poet brings the ‘oldness’ of the technique into the work, the process taps into a deeper consciousness, forming layers of meaning within the work (Oliver 1994, pp. 92–4). The depth of meaning results in poetry operating as two things at once, being a joyful ‘process of language as well as a representation of the things in the world’ (Heaney 1995, p. 5).

Language development grows through the creation of poetry and contemplation, with Heidegger suggesting the poet ‘take the poem as an exercise in poetic self-reflection’, with the metaphor arising from lived experience (2001, p. 97).

A particular example of ‘multi-layering’ is found in the poetry of American poet Anne Sexton (1928–1974) who came to prominence in Boston from 1962 with her style of confessional poetry. Sexton became known for her visceral writing, being one of the first ‘confessional’ female poets to write about the often-taboo subjects of the body, childbirth, blood and death. I draw on her writing in particular because of the resonances it has with women’s issues of birthing that relate to Bertha’s experiences in her journey across the desert. Like Sexton, when exploring these ideas through poetry I find that it is possible to speak into the silences and expose the
internal struggle within the poem. Each poem is a ‘distillation of so much embodied, lived experience’ (Westbury 2002, p. 150). But the inner struggle of the poem can be revealed through metaphor, as the ‘line of words fingers your own heart’ (Dillard 1990, p. 20).

Sexton’s work demonstrates how ‘poetry is an art of the whole body’ (Steele 2012, p. 92), linking the inner and the outer. In Sexton’s writing the figurative language is full of irony as she writes about the weakness of the body, juxtaposing images that serve to expose the damage in the mind. The bones are an extension of self; they can be seen and known as a concrete thing, but the mind is unseen and unknown. The images of bones are metaphors throughout Sexton’s poems as she explores issues of death and the fallibility of the body and the mind, ‘you lie, a small knuckle on my white bed’ and later, ‘Bone at my bone, you drink answers in…’ (2000, p. 19). As Sexton uses the literary technique of metaphor, she is practicing what Parini describes as the ability to ‘notice likenesses’, the act of ‘seeing one thing in terms of another’ (2008, p. 66).

The double meaning of words was particularly relevant when writing the narrative of Bertha Strehlow’s story in poetry where the imagery held within a word through its ancient origins has a multiplicity of meanings in each individual poem. The combined influence of the base meanings of the words in a poem serves to create a layered effect, which gradually builds the story when read together. The effect ‘distinctly…synthesizes experience, feeling and thought…[where]…every line embodies perception, ideation and the breath’ (Minter 2014, p. 89). Like Anne Sexton’s use of bones, the imagery in the verse novel builds in layers of meaning as it draws on metaphor and other figurative language.

The language within the poetry speaks at a deeper level that ‘inspires political and spiritual awareness among readers, opening the heart and mind to possibilities never quite imaginable without it’ (Parini 2008, p. 24). As I wrote Bertha Strehlow’s story there was a personal narrative in the poetry operating, while a historical narrative emerged (Strehlow, B 1945). The ability to comment on society and make political statements has a long history in poetic traditions. Australian poetry critic, reviewer and poet, Geoff Page, writing about 14th century poet Chaucer, observes, ‘[he] was primarily interested in the society around him and its many hypocrisies…he
also knew a good story when he heard one – and recognised the value of poetry as entertainment’ (2006, p. 15). Page notes here that by closely depicting ‘voice’ and images of characters in the vernacular of the day, the poetry can reveal a story that is widely understood and enjoyed. Poetry’s truth-telling abilities are described by Jeanette Winterson thus: ‘you can use [poetry] as a light and a laser…it shows up your true situation and it helps you to carve your way through’ (2012, p. 115).

When describing the essential nature of poetry as a genre to express the deep and poignant issues, the ‘unspeakable’, poet Edward Hirsch says ‘Poetry is a necessary form of speech…poetry is a way of inscribing that feeling of awe. I don’t think we should underestimate the capacity for tenderness that poetry opens within us’ (1999, pp. xii & 3). With the language of poetry ‘drawing words back into alignment with their original pictorial, concrete and metaphorical associations’ there is potential for poetry to touch at a deep psychic and physical level so stories can be told through poetry, creating the opportunity for poetic storytelling (Parini 2008, p. 37).

Poetics in an Aboriginal literary tradition
The Western literary tradition developing in Europe in the 6th century was in its infancy compared with the tradition that had been developing in Aboriginal Australia over many thousands of years (Kay 2004, p. xxviii; James 2009, p. 20). The focus of this thesis is the placement of poetry in an Australian setting, rather than literal dates and direct comparisons of these literary traditions. What is important is an acknowledgement of the growth of literary traditions on both sides of the world, albeit in vastly different ways and at different paces (Wallace 2009, p. 21). In her essay ‘A Question of Fear’ prominent Indigenous writer Alexis Wright identifies the need for an acknowledgement of an Aboriginal literary tradition by mainstream Australia. Wright states that Indigenous literature:

… is still contained within the enormous archive of storytelling poetry held by each Indigenous nation across the country. These are ancient stories of the ancestral creation beings that are learned and stored as mind maps that define the philosophical understanding of Aboriginal law, and which, taken together, embrace the entire continent. (2011, pp. 234–5)
Through the work of Wright, along with other contemporary Indigenous writers such as Kim Scott (2009, 2011) and Philip McLaren (1993, 2001, 2010) there is a changing perception of Indigenous writing. Their contributions to the canon have included award winning novels *Carpentaria* (Wright 2006) and *Benang* (Scott 2001) and *That Deadman Dance* (2011) for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, and *Sweet Water Stolen Land* (McLaren 2001) for the David Unaipon Award. These prose works are examples of the variety and richness with which this literary tradition is expressed in contemporary writing. Using the influences of the long and rich history of Aboriginal storytelling, their work explores voice through a variety of genres such as speculative fiction and historical fiction.

Arguing for the acknowledgement of an Aboriginal literary tradition, Alexis Wright writes that very few Australians ‘outside the Aboriginal world’ have any understanding of this tradition, where words are steeped within the land (2011, p. 234). The interconnection between land and storytelling is also described by Craig San Roche as occurring through sound and visual images ‘[t]he Aboriginal dreaming system works by geographical linkages accompanied by verse, specialised dance and graphics’ (in Santospirito 2013, pp. 70–1). The physical patterns in the landscape forming the shape of the country, networks of the dreaming across the country, are part of an inherent and abiding knowledge system. The physical shape of the country is interlinked with spiritual beliefs explained both poetically and pragmatically by storytellers through chants, songs and stories told as people travel through the country (Carter & Lewis 1999, pp. 131–2).

Over the past 50 years there has been an increasing volume of writing, documentation and recording of the diversity and breadth of Indigenous storytelling. In many cases this writing was (and still is) the result of researchers working in Indigenous communities to record and preserve language and stories in writing. One such researcher, Stephen Muecke, claims that for linguists and anthropologists the methodology of interpreting another culture is to ‘go beyond the surface of what is said in the field to work out the general principles underlying the culture’, with the research becoming a life-changing experience for the white researcher (1983, p. iii). The publication of these ancient stories, which are unknown to the wider literary world, results in their preservation. The process that was viewed historically as being a way of preserving a dying culture is now seen as more than just the legitimisation of
the work because it is written down. The recording of and responding to oral stories is resulting in an exciting area of writing as authors, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, grapple with depicting the Aboriginal world – a world of constant movement and energy in the landscape, to an extent where at times the static pages of a book cannot hold all that is happening in that story.

An example of an example of the spoken word being presented as text is found in the book *Gularabulu* (1983) where we witness the following: ‘The absence of any controlling, authorial point of view contributes to a plenitude of explanations for why or how things happen...’ (Cooke 2014, p. 2). According to Cooke, this writing process results in ‘landscapes [which] are richly poetic, full of various rhythms that allow them to become more than static literary representations’ (p. 2).

Aboriginal writers and academics Heiss and Minter describe the ‘Aboriginal literary tradition as we know it today as having its origins in the late 1960s’ (2008, p. 5). This reference relates particularly to a modern Aboriginal literary tradition reviewed by Heiss and Minter in the *PEN Macquarie Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2009). One such writer gaining attention is poet Lionel Fogarty, whose work in English focuses on the deconstruction of the language where he plays with grammar and tense and structure as a metaphor challenging the notion of colonialisation. For example, in ‘Jukambe Spirit – For the Lost’ he writes:

Don't we all have your spirit  
Bleed sores between teeth  
Feeding lightning rocks  
My Jukambe will devote, come giant shelter.  
My distant Jukambe host a tribe (sic)  
(2009, p. 353)

Fogarty's poems speak of something lost and something out of balance that creates a sense of agitation. The reader is conscious throughout that Fogarty's writing is striving to get back to a place of equilibrium but, at the same time, knows that it never will. His work presents a challenge to standard English, creating a space to acknowledge, "Aboriginal Englishes, [which] until recently, have not been accepted readily accepted by the literary establishment" (Whitebeach 2000, p. 96).

Writing down traditional stories has a number of benefits. The recording and documenting of spoken stories results in language restorative work. Another, as the
work of Paddy Roe in *Gularabulu* (1983), has a dual benefit of preserving language and providing education (Mirritji 1976, p. 8).

Many creative writers and academics, both Australian and international, have attempted to explain the concept of dreaming stories, as did Bertha when she wrote this overview for her National Geographic conference paper in 1944:

> The legends of the aborigines, telling of the superhuman deeds of their ancestors, are their most cherished possessions…they explain the presence of all natural features, and tell of the origin of all animals, birds, and vegetable food stuffs. (1945, p. 48)

More recently, there are increasing contributions in the canon from Aboriginal writers. One such telling is explored by traditional storyteller, Ngal Cook, where he explains,

> …the characters in these stories are Dreamings [Cook’s emphasis], and at times they are both animal and human…Significant places in the landscape are the permanent reminders of these stories. (2007, p. iv)

There are many examples of storytelling in the written form that have evolved from the oral history tradition. In Central Australia, where English remains the second and more often third (or fourth) language for many Aboriginal people, this process of storytelling is a vital way to preserve the language tradition as well as the culture. Traditional elders from Central Australia, Kathleen Wallace (2009) and MK Turner (2010) have written that culture and traditions are intrinsically linked, and it is through the preservation of language and stories that traditions are kept alive. As a result of the acknowledgement of this importance, there are increasing numbers of transcripts of oral history, often with accompanying sound recordings. One such book is *Warlpiri Women’s Voices* (1995) where a group of women are recorded speaking in Aboriginal English and Warlpiri, telling the story of contact history. The women describe the time before white people came to Central Australia, when they were young girls and their families moved freely through the country. Similarly, the works of *Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester* (Lester 1993), *Visions of Mowanjum: Aboriginal Writings from the Kimberley* (1980), and *Kakadu Man* (Neidjie 1985) are all autobiographical works spoken by the authors and recorded and transcribed by others. These works tell the authors' stories, often in their first language and in English. They are told as a written representation of oral storytelling keeping the
poetic tones and energy of the landscape with which they speak. The recordings and transcripts serve to give a voice to the authors and provide wider distribution for traditional stories and biographies.

This collaborative writing provides a space for Aboriginal writers to engage the skills of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, creative writers or poets specifically to assist them to record stories. These become books of poetry, prose storytelling and philosophy, and teaching texts. This form of collaborative writing differs greatly to that of commentary and research, where Indigenous writers are forging a more academic voice with reviews and essays on individual Indigenous work and on the place of Indigenous writing in the literary world (Heiss & Minter 2008, pp. 1–8). All these texts are part of a growing Indigenous literary canon contributing to the body of knowledge of Indigenous writing and storytelling.

Samuel Wagan Watson is an example of a contemporary contribution to the canon from an Indigenous writer. Watson’s poetry is part of a growing body of poetry in Australia developing significance because the writing is drawn from the spiritual influence of the land, juxtaposed with loss. This exploration of loss permeates Watson’s work when, for example, he writes about the problem of how to speak when a language has gone (Rockel 2005, p. 1) in the poem ‘jaded olympic moments’: ‘we’re city people without a language…’ (2010, p. 126). He uses the metaphor of smoke for the loss of language, its ability to dissipate and then disappear, as has happened to so many Aboriginal languages. Using this metaphor he explores political and social concepts in his poetry: ‘Black smoke was saved for industrial accidents, or when a lower income family had their fibro-lined house smothered in winter flames’ (2010, p. 147). His writing draws on day-to-day practical imagery to explore deeper threads of dispossession and alienation. Cars, road trips and breakdowns provide movement and energy throughout his work, and he contrasts destructive images of industry, petrol and oil against a landscape of lost beauty. Throughout the poetry the landscape becomes a character, giving the sense that we as readers are as caught up in the landscape as it is caught up with us (Berry 2011).

Further, Jungian academic David Tacey discusses Jung’s assertion that ‘the earth is alive and the psyche is alert and responsive to the earth’s aliveness’ (Tacey 2009). This sentiment is becoming more prevalent as Australian writers shift from
using the historical (or traditional) language of European and English or American settings, and recognise the writing of the landscape. The resulting poetry gives rise to the distinctiveness of Australian poetry. An increasing body of work arising from Central Australia expresses a distinctive style. Poets such as Ali Cobby Eckermann (2012), Hans Katakarinja (2010), and Mark Inkamala (2009) are creating work where the rhythms and imagery reflect the country and are ‘informed by…an intimate, deeply felt knowledge’; such writers are achieving a ‘sound’ in the language which innately depicts and innately represents the land (Hutchinson 2009 p. 6).

Despite being influenced by the content of Ted’s research from years editing his work, Bertha’s writing often focuses on practical events as she travels deeper into the country. However, the ‘sound’ in rhythm and imagery is evident in the writings of Bertha Strehlow as they reflect the experience of her journey through the landscape. For example in her ‘practical’ style, she recounts ‘the chores’ of daily life following them throughout their camel trek:

…and our so called ‘rest’ days were always the same, work almost from morning till night. Still we did enjoy clean clothes and the yeast bread was a very great treat to two people who were not fond of damper. (1940, p. 11)

Bertha’s words, as expressed in her writing, also have an edge to them. In her writing she frequently depicts conflicting attitudes that juxtapose empathy with Aboriginal people and criticism of their behaviour. For example, when observing the preparations going on for the journey she notes ‘Old Tom’, her husband’s ‘camel boy’, sitting on the verandah: ‘he established himself there with an air of business…’ (1940, p. 9). But then she engages in the lyrical: ‘The sound of hobble chains clinking came to me through the open window…and I saw the old man surrounded by a pile of camel saddles that still had to be inspected and patched’, and she adds: ‘he sorted out hobbles and chains, and placidly twisted dozens of nose strings, and measured rope for nose lines’ (p. 9). However, throughout this passage are examples of language that can be read as racist and paternalistic in comparison to contemporary literature. The colonial assessment of the lifestyle of Aboriginal people was still current in 1930s Central Australia, with ‘the prevailing view that the land, and its indigenous (sic) people needed the newcomers’ skills to progress’ (Issacs 1995, p. 10). The paternalism is evident in her surprising use of the word ‘placidly’ to describe a man who was
working hard, a man described throughout Bertha’s writing as a ‘boy’ while being years older than both Bertha and Ted (1945, 1936). Later, she writes of Tom Longa that ‘he has lived with white people for years, and liked to appear very sophisticated’ (1945, pp. 40 & 46). Her implication is, of course, that he was not sophisticated, but she also wrote admiringly of him and that he served her and Ted ‘faithfully’ for years. But she was depicting people and the environment of a world where, for her, there were constant fluctuations between the known and the unknown and where she was constantly striving to find a balance between comfort and fear. She reported packing familiar things – a book, a piece of clothing – reminders of the world she was leaving behind. The domestic was also the familiar, her day-to-day life. But even the familiar is constantly changing as the couple’s health and wellbeing are under threat from exposure to the landscape. There are constant threats in the environment, from the weather and potential attacks from feral camels. There was also difficulty in moving through the landscape for example, trying to push through a particularly thick stand of mulga. She writes ‘so dense was the growth that our box camels had to force through and there was the constant crackling sound of branches breaking as the loads pressed against them’ (1936, p. 2). A potential threat also existed from within, from her husband, whose overconfidence in his knowledge of the language, the local people and the landscape put them and the camel trek in considerable danger. When Ted decided to go against the advice of his Aboriginal camel handlers, the trek took a less travelled path, towards the Petermann Ranges across hundreds of miles of sand dunes (Strehlow, B 1945, p. 39; McNally 1981, p. 48).

Exploring the idea of a constructed space, writer Glenn Morrison proposes that, ‘[w]here culturally or historically constructed, landscape exist to supply order and meaning about the world, so that in place of the unknown comes a structure of knowledge…a much a construct as a physical reality (2013, p.148). So for Bertha, travelling to unknown places, her faith in Ted appeared to create a mental space within the unfamiliar landscape. This provided her with a sense of safety and gave her a way to discuss the experience and the country she was travelling through.

While on the camel trek and in the many years following, both in Central Australia and when living back in South Australia, Bertha spent most evenings editing
Ted’s research on Aboriginal traditions and stories. Through editing his work, she influenced his search for a deeper meaning of the country and her understanding of the landscape grew. The process of writing about traditional Aboriginal beliefs and the significance of the landscape had repercussions for them both. Researchers Carter and Lewis explain the impact this writing had on Ted Strehlow, whose work Bertha edited:

When [he] translated the Kaporilja rain songs he wanted to do what the Aranda singer had done, sheathe himself in the sound of water flowing, swirling round rocks, deepening grooves, sculpturing ground. He wanted to become through this process of immersion what he wanted to be; perhaps to find his own voice arched in writing. (1999, p. 131)

Despite Bertha’s knowledge of Aranda stories and the country due to her involvement in Ted's work, she is absent from his work, and the silence falls around her.

**Being with Ted – identity and belonging**

An understanding of the land, yet a sense of isolation from not belonging to a specific place, were both expressed in Ted’s writing in the 1970s. He writes that every Aboriginal person has a spiritual connection to their conception site where the ‘…totem of each individual and his (sic) personal links with the world of Eternity were determined by the soul that took up residence in him…’ (Strehlow, TGH 1995, p. 21). This process ties the person to the land. There is no question of where each person is from, and this origin of belonging creates an identity and life-long responsibilities both for the physical place of conception and within families. Ted then asks the question: what about those Australians not born into this system of land and belonging? He writes,

In Central Australia…every man, woman and child was able to call some part of the country forever his or her own. The aboriginal (sic) of Central Australia was thus in a more fortunate position than the modern white Australian, who has to acquire a house, a farm…or even a rented room before he can be regarded as legally domiciled in the land of his birth. (1995, p. 45)

In a way, by writing this, Ted was attempting to write himself into a place. He never owned his own home, but lived in Bertha’s birth home throughout his marriage to her. So despite writing extensively about identity and the sense of belonging of the Aranda, Ted had no place himself.
Following his divorce from Bertha and his remarriage, he wrote more of his birthplace of Hermannsburg, saying that having this birthplace or ‘conception site’ gave him rights to a place that he also claimed only Aboriginal Australians had. He claimed that he was one of the only ‘real’ Australians due to his birthright and that this gave him a place between white and Aboriginal Australians. However, this was a claim that didn’t sit well for either group and something which he was much criticised later in life (Carter 1996).

**Tensions in writing about place**

An example of the tensions that surround the writing of place is the growth of the Jindyworobak movement in the 1930s, interestingly; around the same time Bertha was meeting and then deciding to marry Ted. The name Jindyworobak is derived from an Aboriginal word apparently meaning ‘to join’ (Clunies Ross 1981, p. 58). The movement was started by Rex Ingmellis who was a teacher from Unley High School in South Australia. The group was driven by the belief that there should be a reimagining of what constituted Australian culture, including a new understanding of the landscape termed “environmental values” (Dally 1986, p. 5). The group expressed a desire to link ‘settler cultures and tens of thousands of years of indigenous song cycles and other poetries of telling, ceremony and communication’ (Kinsella 2009, p. 9). The effect of this movement, though, resulted more in the appropriation of Indigenous culture than something that would be of equal benefit. As Australian poets strove to speak to this ‘new’ place of writing about the land in the early to mid-20th century, they were often faced with the difficulty of negotiating a language in which to speak of the landscape. But as writers throughout postcolonial history learned more about the country, a developing expression in the language was reflected in their writing (Holmes 2011). The writing of poet Carol Hull provides an example of the emotions that arise from the tension of being in a place that is both home and alien at the same time:

> From up here the land is charted, colour coded, topographic & mapped out.
> We keep our distance from it, humming in space (1997, p. 7)

Hull’s work has an effect of looking down on the land whilst being *in* the land, the distance and closeness occurring simultaneously.
Tensions also exist in the accounts of Bertha and Ted Strehlow’s experiences in Central Australia. They write freely of their relationships with Indigenous people and their journey through the landscape are on the public record, but there is also a great deal of information that is considered too sensitive and sacred to share (SRC 2005, p. 1). In recent years though, with the permission of the Aranda traditional owners, Indigenous consultants, Mark Inkamala and Shane Angeles, are carrying out research into the ownership of place.

While Bertha’s writing is emotional, its main effect is that of distancing herself and her reader. She keeps to general observations of place. The effect is to build silence around her. When she does allow herself emotional moments, Bertha's writing becomes poetic and the effect crystalises the moment, as if she has taken a close-up photograph. She writes, ‘Sometimes drops of moisture froze on the camel boxes, forming delicate lacy patterns that sparkled in the early-morning sunshine before they melted’ (1945, p. 36). Bertha came to know the country intimately because of her journey travelling through it, but the reserve in her writing is strong throughout.

But, as suggested by Heidegger (2001, p. 97), the style of writing that is instilled in poetry gradually creates a new lexicon, a new language and this has an identifying quality for writers and readers (Arthur 2003, pp. 1–3). Poet and academic Martin Harrison also explored the development of a new form of poetic expression within Australia and how it might be expressed on the page. He suggested that Australian writing has a profound distinctiveness from the European and American traditions:

What such poetry deals with is not just a feeling about landscape or land in a romantic or nostalgic way. One thing indeed that sets Australian work apart is a prevalent sense that ‘country’ is something you are a part of, something that changes your sense of self and placement and which requires a change in envisioning if you are to see it and understand it. (2007, p. 54)

Writer Tim Winton supports this perspective of the Australian literary tradition. He stated that for years Australian writers have had to understand and learn about the world from a European viewpoint, but now writers are now using their own words for things, words that work in an Australian setting. It is as if the historical
landscape that few white people could recognise has come into focus. Winton suggests that this way of describing what Australian writers are attempting to express about the landscape has grown from the realisation that we need the land more than it needs us, a situation creating a constant readjustment and realignment in the people who are trying to be in the landscape (2014).

Conclusion

With the development of writing that demonstrates an Australian style, there is also a growing understanding of the poems that arise from the landscape. Alexis Wright discusses these developments in her commentary on *Fishtails in the Dust*, an anthology of work by poets and prose writers from Central Australia:

In this great, sacred landscape the country is speaking through all of these many different voices and surely demonstrates how the land of the ancestors and its people continues to shape and help grow a sense of maturity and strength that comes from those living close to the land. (2009)

Along with richness in the meaning and sounds in English there can be a multilayered depth in storytelling. Further, in the case of some Aboriginal writers' use of English, the language can be deconstructed to make it fit with an Australian setting. Using the depth of language within poetry drawn from ancient traditions on both sides of the linguistic divide, I suggest that there is a developing lexicon in literature grown from an increasing recognition of the distinctiveness of the land coming into focus, as prose writers and poets alike hear its resonance. This is particularly true in the journey taken by Bertha Strehlow. This landscape is a moving, living entity in which she ultimately leaves parts of herself.

The glimpse which poetry provides can allow for the option of a new way of thinking about place. It can take the domestic and the mundane and place them into the political sphere (Heaney 1995, pp. 3–4). The background research adds to the depth and energy of the poem. The process of focusing on the particular then highlights the general, as with all writing. But in this way poetry in particular, works to draw the reader in so the wider meaning contained in the poem will be interpreted by the reader. Thus I hope that the poetry of the verse novel demonstrates a distinctive form of poetic expression with words that work in Australian setting.
Chapter VII

The verse novel

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

TS Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1943)
Introduction

This chapter explores how poetry, and the verse novel in particular, is effective in the exploration of Bertha’s historical silence and how the telling of her story in verse provides her with the opportunity to speak. Through my research of verse novels, I have identified the large number of verse novels focusing on historical biography that have been published in the past 10 years, with narrative explored in verse (Pollntiz 2009, p. 229).

It is Bertha’s silent life that this work is giving voice to, for a woman who has had a quiet presence in history. The primary historical sources have remained the guide for the development of the poems for the creative work. As these speak with the voice of Bertha Strehlow, the poems come to life with the unfolding narrative of the verse novel.

In this chapter I will explore how the poetry within the verse novel is enlivened through the creation of the persona/character as the narrative voice of the story. I will focus specifically on how the use of the first-person point of view enables the development of the persona/character of Bertha Strehlow. I will also investigate the verse novel and its facility as a compelling genre for the telling of historical biography. A discussion of verse novels based on the lives of historical figures will demonstrate how the verse novel is an effective and vibrant genre of the telling of Australian history. This chapter also investigates how history is told with the weaving of fact and fiction in the poetry of the verse novel. The writing of Mary Oliver (1994) is explored in relation to her discussion on poetics and poetic techniques for the creation of the dynamic poetry that sustains the integrity of the verse novel. To discuss how the development of character and narrative in the verse novel work, the chapter will also briefly investigate the work of Australian poet Dorothy Porter, specifically her verse novel What a piece of work (1999), where the character of Frank is based on the Australian poet Francis Webb. The discussion will include Porter’s use of voice and narrative in the development of her characters, and will provide an acknowledgement that her work informs the poetry in the creative work of this thesis.

Fundamental to the discussion is the premise that the verse novel was the obvious genre for the telling of Bertha Strehlow’s story in her voice, as it provides the physicality of space between the poems, a space for the spoken as well as the unspoken (Jacobson 2009, p. 155).
This chapter also includes a discussion on the role of the annotations which are presented at the end of each poem in *Giving voice to silence*. An exploration is included about how they act to authenticate and provide an historical background to the poems. While discussing the benefits of annotations in my poetry, I also explore how annotations have been used by other poets to provide detail, background and context to their work.

**Verse Novels**

A survey carried out by academic Christopher Pollnitz reported that ‘in 2004, some thirty verse novels had been published in Australia since the mid 1970s, the number accelerating through the nineties into the turn of the millennia’ (Tranter 2012, p. 6). Many of these early verse novels discussed in Pollnitz’s survey were aimed at young adults, but recently an increasing number of established poets have produced historical biography in verse novels, adding to the scope and flexibility of the genre (Symmons Roberts 2006, p. 1). As adult verse novels, especially historical biography, are the focus of this thesis, I will concentrate my analysis on them, rather than on young adult verse novel. Some of these include Jordie Albiston’s *Botany Bay Document: A poetic history of the women of Botany Bay* (1996) and *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (1998); and Jessica Wilkinson’s *Marionette: a biography of Miss Marion Davies* (2012). While this is not exhaustive, the list demonstrates the variety of subjects covered and the opportunities explored in the genre. Academic, poet and verse novelist Linda Weste who has contributed significantly to scholarship on the adult verse novel, suggests that ‘[e]ach verse novel conjoins a poetic template – an assemblage of poetic elements organised according to certain principles – with a narrative template…’ (Weste 2013, p. 3). To draw the verse novel into the historical, I am using the template by focusing on specific people, places and events, the historical content also has the effect of making a broader comment socially, politically and economically in Australia. All of these verse novels effectively demonstrate the development of character and narrative in verse, I will focus on two, *The Darwin Poems* (Ballou 2010) and *Jane, Lady Franklin* (Erberhard 2004), which explore these elements by revealing the inner life of the characters through the poet’s words (Ballou 2009, p. 1). By focusing on writing about the enduring themes of loss, identity and belonging, these works have the potential to reach a wide readership.
A common theme among these historical verse novels is to raise questions about the social equality of women. By using the persona-narrator, the authors can challenge the reader to also ask questions of our society. Pollnitz states that verse novels can create an effective narrative by balancing themes in the story with an ‘understated pathos’ (2009, p. 238).

Ballou (2009) recreates the life of Charles Darwin in poetry with a commanding tone. Darwin’s character is gradually revealed through poems that chart the chronological events of his life. The use of the third-person narrator provides the effect of looking over the shoulder of Darwin as he shares his world (Ballou 2010, p. 2). In this way the reader is filled with wonder at the same time as Darwin is – with each new thought and discovery. The poems focus on the details of Darwin’s explorations and discoveries, but they also focus on his inner torment and from these we glimpse his personality. Each poem has a layering effect where the reader learns as Darwin himself learns:

The sea has made him
it was true
more expansive of mind
but evasive too,
jelly like
able to dive
into the tiniest fissures
in the stones… (p. 117)

In these third-person point-of-view poems, Ballou creates concrete imagery to visualise the process of Darwin’s thinking. We understand his obsessions; we sit with him and his children on the beach; we are with him sailing over distant seas. Ballou uses the intensity of metaphor to demonstrate the intensity of his inner character; she lets the reader into the intimate spaces of his mind, as seen in this ‘list’ poem:

The rain on the roof, the distant clatter
of children in bed in other rooms
who believe they are keeping quiet.
Clean sheets. Two pairs of bare feet
meeting
under the summer quilt (p. 129)

Writing a new and engaging narrative of an historical figure such as Darwin, about whom there already exists numerous biographical works, offers a distinct
challenge (Ballou 2009, p. 193). Ballou has achieved such a narrative effectively through the poetry and because of it. In her work the genre of the verse novel demonstrates its versatility and possibilities.

The work of Eberhard (2004) contrasts with that of Ballou’s in tone, point of view and intensity. Eberhard writes of Jane Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin who was the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Dieman’s Land from 1837 to 1843. In Jane, Lady Franklin the author assumes the persona of a relatively unknown historical figure. The poems are ethereal in tone, providing the reader with a sense of stepping across the landscape of Jane Franklin’s life. Eberhard combines her own experiences and knowledge of the landscape, but is still effective in providing an historical distance between herself and her character, as in this excerpt from ‘Snakes’:

How I dreamed of Paradise
this southern land at the world’s edge,
weeks of blue water separating old from new.
I tasted air in my dreams,
faint hills, mounds of whales;
the beginning of things (2004, p. 3)

The poem has vast areas of space in it, a metaphor for the ocean she has travelled across on the journey to Australia. The biblical reference to ‘Paradise’ extends the metaphor of Eden – of the new world Lady Jane has come to. It is a metaphysical poem, encompassing religious ‘old world’ references, much like the memory of finding the gaps on a map that reads ‘here be dragons’, a term used for many hundreds of years by cartographers to describe the ‘unknown’ sections of the ancient world (Penman 1986). This spaciousness renders the journey to Australia, ‘The Antipodes’ (Eberhard 2004, p. 32), as travelling to the end of the world, which matched the European and English sense of geographical distance (Cowan 1997).

Rather than placing a focus on personalised poems, in Lady Jane Eberhard seeks to build a history of the time that Jane Franklin lived in Tasmania. She explains her intentions: ‘I had intended to write poems about nineteenth century Tasmania – its general system, the treatment of the Aborigines…shipwrecks, the female factories’ (p. 105). She writes that Jane Franklin became her vehicle for the telling of history. The effect is that of a bird’s eye view, with the reader remaining separate to the figure of Franklin, while gaining exposure to the unfolding events of colonial Hobart. By
giving voice to Lady Jane, Eberhard has chosen an authentic narrator who witnessed the growth of Hobart town and had first-hand knowledge of some of the disturbing events, which laid the foundation for Australia’s development as a nation. Through her eyes, the reader sees how the emerging country saw itself in relation to the world. Eberhard observes through her character that, ‘walking here is to enter/the vastness of the sky/where the curve of the earth is centred’ (pp. 32 & 72).

There is also a diversity in the style of both the poetry and the narrative in these two verse novels. While Ballou explores the story of Darwin from within his character, Eberhard takes on the persona of Franklin to convey a wider history. But both works demonstrate versatility and potential in the genre. Both works use setting to launch the poetry. In both, the sea provides a context, a backdrop for the reader to place the character. The setting gives the character something to react to, respond to, or to rail against and through this both works demonstrate the versatility and potential of the genre.

**Finding voice**

When exploring historical or contemporary events in narrative a key factor to sustain momentum in the work is the development of character. The character at the centre of the story provides energy and interest in fiction, non-fiction, prose and poetry. Poets working in the genre of the verse novel can engage the voice of character-narrator which can facilitate writing from the point of view of another. This can give the writing both distance and perspective. American poet Philip Schultz explains that in the writing of the verse novel it is vital for the poet to explore a new viewpoint from which to stand. This viewpoint becomes that of the narrator rather than the poet, which is ‘the art of making people see things through the eyes of someone else’ (nd, p. 1). This provides distance and perspective necessary for the poet ‘to understand what the story is really about’ (nd, p. 1). As the poet takes the opportunity to step back and allow the narrator to be the spokesperson of the story in the first person, characteristics of the narrator come into focus. When achieved effectively, the writing is enriched with the highly specialised details of the lives of the characters.

The effective development of the persona-narrator involves honing in on specific details that are only known to that character, thus evoking an authentic voice. Authority in the voice gives the reader a sense that the narrator is speaking from a viewpoint of knowledge. This grows from either knowledge about a specific place or
people and through being privy to the narrator’s imagined internal dialogue. The specific turn of phrase of the character can create a complete poetic image, as explored by essayist and poet Pamela White Hadas in her verse novel ‘The Bandit Queen Remembers’:

Just because I knew my power as a woman, Pearl,
I didn’t stop with that. Even before Bud was chilled
I learnt to ride with my knees, jump up the dust
And iron out the kinks in a green cull’s back.
I practiced slappin leather in the barn till I could
hit a pheasant’s eye from across the field (White Hadas 1983, p. 61)

The use of the vernacular of White Hadas’ verse novel provides an authenticity in the development of the character’s ‘voice’. It situates the character in a particular era, identifying a place in history and social class. When this authenticity is achieved, the character’s voice carries the narrative. Each verse novel will differ in structure and style but there is an essential energy in play between poetics and narrative, and ‘the unique relationship of poetic and narrative elements lead to a dynamic duality of design’ (Weste 2013, p. 1). Maintaining the tension between these forces of poetic language and narrative causes a ‘tugging’ in the energy. The interplay between the narrative and poetry in the verse novel is key to the success of the work. Further, when the persona-narrator is established as convincing, an empathy arises for the character and the reader is compelled to remain with the text for the duration of the journey (Kinzie in Weste 2013, p, 3).

This technique is used in many historical verse novels, such as Jack (Johnson 2008) and Akhenaten (Porter 1992), for example, the persona-narrator aims to create a sense longing for place, so the reader sees the character through the context of a setting both in place and of place. The economy of language in the poetry of these verse novels creates an intensity in the sense of place whilst still providing a context to the reader. This is achieved by the spaces within and between each poem as the poet creates a series of individual pieces (Bennett 2012, p. 10). When woven together in the right structure, the content and poetic language combines to create an effective narrative.

The poetry of the verse novel, like that of all poetry, provides for a genre that engages techniques of subtlety and refinement in the writing process. Imagery, metaphor and simile heighten the language, allowing each individual poem to touch
on the subject or the issues in a cameo or moment, but in combination growing a narrative. The information gleaned from each poem builds slowly as it grows the narrative; much like a bee alighting on one flower and the next, gradually gathering pollen, the story grows in richness and complexity.

The development of a ‘sustained and compelling narrative voice’ is fundamental to the movement and energy within the verse novel. As mentioned, poet Judy Johnson wrote the historical verse novel *Jack*, a character based on the experiences of pearling captains in the Torres Strait in 1938 (2008, p. 294). Johnson wrote that as she developed the fictitious character of Jack Falconer, she drew heavily on historical details to produce authenticity in the voice in the first person narrative:

‘You need to help
me sometimes…specially
you know?’

He’s looking confused,
twitchy.

‘You could be old
Capt’n Jack’s best boy
eh?’ I wink

with my one good eye (2008, p. 133)

The persona of Jack Falconer is that of a deranged and unstable character who grows progressively more dangerous throughout the book. This increasing tension creates a claustrophobic effect in the narrative. The pearling boat is a metaphor for the lack of control the characters have over their lives as they are at the mercy of the weather, the ocean, and their captain:

It felt better when we were moving’
wind ballooning the sails
the fresh bite of it
on my fevered brow (2008, p. 274)

In terms of characterisation, and the voice of the narrator, in *Giving voice to silence* I aimed for authenticity, through, for example, Bertha’s characterisation of the camels. For Bertha, the people, the landscape and the animals became a new narrative
from which to work. Everything was new and therefore interesting. The camels became a lifeline in the desert when she became ill. Bertha writes about them often and with great affection, giving them names and personalities. They are present in her writing as other characters in the story.

In *Giving voice to silence* Bertha, as the voice of the persona-narrator, is engaged in order for me, the author, to define the genre, and to place the story in the hands of Bertha Strehlow, the historical figure. Writing ‘as’ Bertha gave me space to work around the boundaries of history. This results in a blurring of fiction and non-fiction, as the narrative gives the historical figure a platform from which to speak. Despite Bertha’s voice being mediated through my words, her history and her story can be seen to become a living thing through the poetry, because they are based in fact. Further it could be argued that the themes in the verse novel are relevant today because of the continual negotiations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the present moment and in the experience of the reader (Denning 2006, p. 8).

Described by Heaney as ‘a poetry where the co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our own experience’ (1995, p. 11), such poetry allows the reader to meet Bertha at her point in history while providing a context for the reader to experience the emotion of the moment.

The poetry throughout Bertha’s journey becomes a vehicle for entering into the spaces between the poetry, where the combinations of words and spaces together develop into a complete story.

As the persona-narrator of Bertha Strehlow tells her story, she is speaking both as events unfold for her in the desert, but also from memory. There is a sense in the dream-like poems in the verse novel that she is aware of the loss she has experienced. From ‘Small things’:

Distant voices,  
the possibility of a car,  
the call of children,  
and my empty weeping womb;  
silence in the  
smallest of things (2015 p. 80)
With a strong and robust voice Bertha speaks with knowledge and experience, giving her authority through the poetry. Within her memory is the longing for of a time when the early love of marriage was not a romantic notion but, rather, a lived reality.

Bertha’s acceptance of her situation comes from her patient nature, as one who experienced personal loss very early in life (Hill 2003, p. 230). Her poems then are drawn from her past memories as much as they are from the events of her present. Marilynne Robinson explores how the power of memory links to a sense of longing for what has passed. In her novel *Housekeeping*, she writes,

> But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfil itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to have kept us waiting so long. (1981, p. 167)

Robinson’s is a lyrical response to the complexity of memory and loss, and her character’s response to it something she describes thus: ‘memory is a sense of loss’ (p. 166). Throughout the writing process, I have also been influenced by historical fiction such as Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, where he focuses on a particular point in time, the Sri Lankan civil war, and then constructs fiction around this. This process achieves a narrative enriched by memory which is combined with historical fact (2000, p.1). As the persona-narrator of Bertha carries the events in *Giving voice to silence*, this sense of loss needs to be balanced within the narrative to maintain energy and movement in the story. The balanced fusion of memory, loss and longing drives the energy.

**Placement in history – Annotations**

A character’s placement in history was the inspiration for the persona narrator for poet Anne Michaels in her collection of poems *The Weight of Oranges*, based on the lives of significant, but often little known, women in history. The poem ‘The Second Search’ is written from the point of view of the Nobel Prize winning Polish physicist Marie Skłodowska Curie, where she speaks directly to her husband as the two of them work on their deadly material: ‘I watched you/bent over your table like a jeweller/setting things that can’t be seen…My hands burn/all the time’ (Michaels 2000, pp. 171–4). This poem sits within a series of individual voices, and when read
together they are sustained by the themes of longing and loss. Michaels provides a brief quote to provide context along with the title of the poem, then the body of the poem provides the journey into the voice, and thus into the character and persona. The ‘Notes’ in her epilogue provide valuable background information about the subjects of the poems (pp. 203–6). The use of annotations or notes in this way contextualises the poetry and places it in history (Allison 2012, pp. 77–82; Wilkinson 2012, pp. 95–100).

This formatting reflects the practice of using ‘annotations’ to accompany each of the poems in Giving voice to silence. The annotations at the base of each poem throughout the verse novel provide a commentary supported by literary texts and historical sources to ensure the accuracy of the events and details of daily life. Much of this information is drawn from Bertha herself. The mix of fact and fiction – the historical texts and my interpretation in the poems – provides an authenticity through a unique style of storytelling. Using historical dates and records and blending them with my experiences, spoken and unspoken, reveals a full and rich story of Central Australia, one that contributes to the historical record and provides a voice for the largely silent Bertha Strehlow.

Further, they provide a commentary supported by literary texts and historical sources to ensure accuracy of events and details of the Strehlows’ daily life. This practice has been engaged by many verse novelists, including some previously mentioned; Adrienne Eberhard’s Jane, Lady Franklin (2004), Emily Ballou’s The Darwin Poems (2010), Anna Kerdijk Nicholson’s Possession: poems about the voyage of Lt James Cook in the Endeavour 1768–1771 (2010); and Dael Allison’s Fairweather’s Raft (2012). While the format of the annotations may differ in each of the texts, the role they play remains similar as they act to verify and authenticate the historical information that is revealed through the poetry. My use of annotations gives a context to Bertha’s story and expands the narrative. Further, it provides the reader with background to the verse novel that allows for a sound theoretical basis supported by historical research.

Weaving history
Using verse to explore biography can hint at the ‘empty spaces’ of history, expressed by Nelson as the ‘deficit model of history’ (2007, p. 1). Where historical records are seen as the “truth”, the writer’s role is to “extend the edifice”, to make it more
“perfect”, more “complete” without gaps’ (Nelson 2007, p. 1). In 2006, an argument developed between historians and fiction writers in Australia when a debate arose over the mixing of fact and fiction in storytelling. The blending of fact and fiction in biographical history-writing occurs frequently (DeLillo, 1997, p. 4). It was interesting, then, when this ‘blending’ generated a great deal of discussion in the mid-2000s in the debate over Kate Grenville’s novel The Secret River (Grenville 2005). Statements made about ‘using history to create fiction’ raised the ire of historians Inga Clendinnen (2005) and Mark McKenna (2006). They objected to Grenville’s claims that she was putting ‘the “story” back into “history”’, leading to historians accusing her of stating her novel was history (Grenville 2007 & 2005).

This debate has created a point in time whereby all who write on historical fiction since the publication of The Secret River write with a new consciousness of fiction and history writing. Sonia Chung (2010) writes about the enjoyment of writing into historical fiction – into ‘not knowing’ – with excitement and a refreshing tone. Chung’s viewpoint is somewhat different to that of the historians who have expressed concern that the facts are being stolen and then reworked into fiction by novelists (p. 2).

Even though the Clendinnen/Grenville (2006, 2007) debate focused on historical fiction rather than the verse novel as a genre, it was directly related to the writing of fiction using historical characters. Much has been made of Clendinnen’s (2006) criticism of Grenville’s claim that The Secret River (2005) was history, a claim that Grenville denied when she wrote in her response that though ‘the book isn't history…it's solidly based on history. Most of the events in the book “really happened” and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote’ (2007).

Fiction writer and academic Gail Jones describes gaps as ‘the unknown’ (2010). She states that gaps or empty spaces arise specifically from loss, and from the gaps that loss creates (per. comm 2010). She says, in relation to her novel Sorry:

I’m very interested in what is forgotten, the way that certain voices in history are forgotten, the rights and values of indigenous people in particular are lost or locked away. (quoted in Kossew 2014, p. 3)

Jones focuses on the exploration of gaps and spaces in her writing, and that focus is echoed in my own writing (2014, p. 2). Poet and academic Kevin Brophy describes such gaps as a ‘breaking up’ of the usual path of communication, which
achieves a poetic sparseness noting that the fragmentation of the language of poetry directly influences the thoughts of the reader by slowing the reading process and allowing for greater contemplation of the work (2003, p. 86). Through the poetry of *Giving voice to silence*, the vivid moments of Bertha’s life in Central Australia are told in a dramatised way, using ‘cameos’ of poetry. The aim was to increase the intensity of the narrative by opening up possibilities. These ‘vivid moments’ bring Bertha into the writing and explore the experience of living at a significant time in history, and thereby the verse novel reveals Bertha’s part in the history.

The historical events of Bertha’s life and the factual information about the era drive the plot, moving the story forward, while the interweaving themes of place and belonging are revealed by inner reflective poems. In fact, as I wrote Bertha’s story, I found that through writing a story about one woman’s life wider issues were brought into focus, such as the impact of government policy on the treatment of the Indigenous Australians, and the treatment of women. Academic and poet Jeri Kroll (2010) describes this process: ‘wrestling or playing with stories is a way…of fulfilling imaginative potential for another era’ (p. 3).

Christopher Pollnitz (2009, p. 235) suggests that the verse novel form is effective for use in historical fiction because it can push the author into ‘quasi-confessional intensity’ by the use of the first-person monologue. By writing about Bertha Strehlow in the first person, I can do as Pollnitz suggests and interrogate the inner landscape of the character.

**Liminality: the reader/poem relationship**

The process that occurs between poem and reader creates an ‘…almost physical emotion’ which can become a fundamental element in the development of the persona-narrator (Heaney 1995, p. 8). This can become element in the development of the persona-narrator as the character speaks about the journey they are embarking on. Liminality is the space in poetic narrative, of potential and anticipation, where the reader fills gaps in story with their own interpretation. In the verse novel the gaps are the spaces between the poems, the white on the page. The reader experiences the empathy needed to follow the character through the emotion and drama of their story (Schultz nd, p. 1). Consistent throughout is the narrative and how the growth and development of the character changes and develops in the story, and how this sits with the reader.
The reader may or may not initially be conscious of the distance between the character and the story as they enter into the narrative. But as Borges states, ‘poetry lies in between the meeting of poems and reader…’ (quoted in Heaney 1995, p. 8). This meeting has at its core an understanding and appreciation of engagement between the reader and poem, described by academic Josie Arnold, as ‘liminality’ (2009, p. 2). Even though Arnold’s discussion on liminality is focused on autobiography, I feel it is also a useful concept when applied to the reading of poetry. If the liminality can be described as a threshold, and a midpoint between two spaces, then this is where the poem and the reader can meet. Adrienne Rich explores the concept in poetry saying that poems create ‘another kind of space where other human and verbal relationships are possible’ (1996, p. 20). Arnold’s research focuses on the development of intimacy between the writer and the reader. She proposes there is a sub-voice existing and that in this in-between space is a ‘liminality’ which takes the reader to a dream-like space that the writer had not envisioned as the piece was being written (p. 2). What is at stake here is how the work speaks to the reader. The reader – ‘the assumed third party’ (Ballou 2010, p. 3) – brings the images within the work to life, in a way individual to each reader, as the words on the page mix with the reader’s own memory and experience. The spaces and gaps are filled by imagination, coloured-in by the reader (Harrison 2013, p. 2). The discussion of the reader interpreting meaning within the text is also known as the reader-response. Hirsch has described this link between the writer and the reader of poetry as having a ‘mutuality’ between them, he goes so far to say that the poem depends on this link (2006, p. 1).

Kroll discusses this in the light of poetry as seen through the lens of a verse novelist. She states there is a need to interrogate the poetry of the verse novel to ensure that ‘the interstitial work inhabits a permanent liminal space that is positive rather than negative...’ (2010, p. 6). The story and character should not be privileged over language-use or poetics and aesthetics of the poetry of the verse novel (p. 6). As close attention is paid to the generation of poetry, writers are mindful of the how meaning is created through poetic language (Parini 2008, p. 20).

This mindfulness is demonstrated by Mary Oliver where she states her rules for ensuring focus when writing poetry:

I set three ‘rules’ for myself. Every poem I write…must have a genuine body, it must have sincere energy, and it must have a spiritual purpose…[Over the years] I have added other admonitions and consents. I want it to be rich with
‘pictures of the world’. I want it to carry threads for the perceptually felt world into the intellectual world. I want each poem to indicate a life lived with intelligence, patience, passion and whimsy. (2004, p. 63)

Oliver’s ‘rules’ challenge herself and other poets to demand questions of their work and to ensure once placed in the world, the poems also ask questions of the world (Heaney 1995, p. 191). This intensity of purpose also demands much of the poetry arising from verse novels. These exacting standards need to be met for the narrative of the work to have a sense of purpose and energy and to prevent the work from faltering. US novelist Don DeLillo encapsulates this sense of purpose in his essay ‘Power of History’ (1997) where he comments, ‘it is fiction’s role to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience…[it] is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements’ (p. 5). If the right balance is achieved, the relationship between the poem and the reader will create a question that ultimately lingers long after the poem has been read and long after the story is told (Oliver 2004, p. 63).

The persona-narrator of Bertha speaks of loss, looming danger and coming face-to-face with death. As she speaks of these things, she also speaks of beauty. This being ‘inside’ the poetry is described by poet John Keats as “negative capability”: ‘that is…being capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason…’ (1891, p. 48). This process of sitting with the difficulty, or a sense of ‘unease’ in the poetry, and allowing it to emerge in the writing, provides for a greater emotional impact of the work. The writing approaches what Mary Oliver describes as ‘carrying the threads from the perceptual felt world to the intellectual world’ (2004, p. 63). Keats refers to ‘taking part’ in the life of the poem, so much so that being in the poem, the reader experiences the emotion of the imagery in the work (1891, p. 48). As Mary Oliver explains:

the concept of negative capability goes to the heart of the matter – the ‘mere’ diction of the poem, in any age, is the vehicle that holds then transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling. Poetry cannot happen without it. (1994, p. 84)

The themes of loss and identity in Bertha’s story provide a meeting place for the reader to engage with her story and thus understand something of her experience. This point of understanding – or liminality – is a process that will break the silence around her story and help readers to enter into her struggle through the poetry. Thus,
storytelling in verse is a process of trusting the narrator to take the poetry where it needs to go (Pollitz 2004, p. 235).

**What a piece of work**

In Dorothy Porter’s *What a piece of work* (1999) the central character is Dr Peter Cyren, superintendent of the Callan Park Psychiatric Hospital. His work involves highly experimental treatments on his patients but throughout the course of the book, he loses control over his own life. The narrative uses an ironic metaphor as his downfall is reflected in the lives of those he’s meant to be caring for, those who have no say over what happens to their bodies as the institution ‘plays’ with their minds. The first-person point of view holds the narrative with a commanding voice and brash tone established in the opening poem of the novel. The poetry of ‘Frank’, who is one of the inpatients of the mental asylum, is woven throughout the narrative as a type of poetic ‘meta-text’. The effect is that the protagonist, Peter, recounts some of Frank’s poems, for example, ‘The poems behind Frank’s back’:

> ‘My poems sneak up on me’
> Frank reveals…
> ‘I can hear them behind me
> rustling their leathery wings’ (p. 93)

The effect is of reading poems within poems. As the story unfolds, the poetry of Frank holds a mirror up to the narrator as he becomes more and more exposed, becoming gradually unhinged as the narrative proceeds. As a character Frank comes to represent something greater than a mere person – as is the effect and function of fiction; the ‘character’ can hold mythical qualities and the telling of their story becomes a representation of something much greater than themselves (Deleuze 1997, p. 3). Paul Carter suggests that incorporating one person’s story in the historical space creates a ‘new history’ (1996, p. 25). By fictionalising biography and presenting it in verse a poetic space is created in the text.

There are parallels to Bertha Strehlow’s story with the blurring of the line between biography and history as the story of the character exposes aspects of society because of its place in history. The character is situated at a point in time and it is that moment which is vital for the resonances thus encapsulated. These moments are politically significant times in history where the narrative reflects on the character’s reaction. Did they speak out about an injustice? Did they do nothing? How did those
around them react? What does their reaction say about society in general? In the case of Peter Cyren, the doctor at the centre of the narrative in *What a piece of work* (1999), by holding this savage picture of the mental health system in Australia in the 1970s before us, we are asked: who was watching over the wellbeing of mentally ill people, and why were treatments such as the controversial ‘deep sleep therapy’ allowed to be carried out, apparently without safeguards?

These questions become relevant when comparing them to the oppressive government policies of the 1930s when Bertha Strehlow lived in Central Australia. Bertha was witness to the intense control of Aboriginal people’s lives and commented on the fact that she could not see the benefits for Aboriginal people (1945, p. 47). The questions arise again and again in the retelling of historical events: who was (and is) challenging the status quo, and who is asking the questions and standing up for the oppressed? The vehicle of the verse novel and the placement of Bertha Strehlow in the centre of the action gives the reader the opportunity to be involved in Bertha’s life, and as thus, develop an understanding of the complexity her experiences.

**Conclusion**
The various configurations of verse novels provide a potent genre for the telling of stories with immediacy and intimacy. When deploying the first-person point of view, the narrative has a fresh and direct approach where the reader experiences the events in the story as they unfold. The genre has been used to good effect in young adult fiction, and in an increasing number of historical biographies, which bring history into the hands of contemporary readers.

The themes of loss, memory, belonging and identity explored in many of the historical verse novels discussed here shine a light on the contemporary world and expose many of the same political issues and problems experienced in the past. Verse novels can ask the same questions that were asked many years earlier, at the actual times in history when the verse novels were set.

Through the genre of the verse novel, the life and achievements of Bertha Strehlow can be acknowledged as the verse gives her voice. Her published papers that expressed concern over the treatment of and attitudes towards Aboriginal people can be considered afresh in a new form, with the lyric nature of the verse novel providing a space between the words where questions that challenge the status quo can be asked.
I could identify with Francesca Rendle–Short and her comments she made about writing that enters other people’s lives, ‘I was making work to make one weep…’ (2010, p. 4). The writing journey I had embarked on was as much mine as it was Bertha’s. Gradually, her experiences began to flavour my thinking, and I had a growing sense of her being present in my work. Historian Inga Clendinnen describes the process of writing deeply in another’s life: ‘we taste their lives in our mouths’ (in Rendle–Short 2010, p. 4). I have a strong sense that as I reach into Bertha’s life through my creative work that it too can contribute to the body of writing of biographical verse novels, as it brings Bertha Strehlow out of silent shadows and allows her to speak.
Conclusion

History has no life unless you give it a home in your consciousness
JM Coetzee *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007, p. 104)
History and poetry are drawn together in this thesis to tell the story of Bertha Strehlow. Bertha’s story has been filtered through the history of the storied landscape, stories as old as the land itself, known and repeated over the millennia. This background is the platform from which Bertha’s story is launched. Poetry is the distillation of thought and emotion on the page, as it takes the reader into the moment through what I describe as word pictures. This is also a metaphor for Bertha’s experience in the desert. The lack of water, the cold and the rawness of the desert is translated in imagery onto the page through poetry for the reader to experience. Central to Bertha’s experience is her interaction and her growing awareness of the landscape. This increased understanding of the landscape becomes most significant when she faces the realisation that she may not survive the journey. The desert then is revealed as a character in Bertha’s story, as it becomes a living entity through the poetry in *Giving voice to silence*. The retelling of Bertha’s story through poetry also provides an insight into the landscape within which she finds herself, the arid landscape of Central Australia. In this way I give Bertha Strehlow, a figure who has almost been erased from history, a voice to speak about her years in the Centre and how she reinvented herself by drawing strength and resilience from the land, its people and, ultimately, herself.

‘Uncovering Bertha Strehlow’s voice through poetry’, explores the background of Bertha’s unique experience in Central Australia and how poetry is a vital and relevant genre for the retelling of her story. An examination of the Deleuze’s concept of the ‘two books’ created a theoretical framework in which to consider writing Bertha’s story. The concept appealed to me on a number of levels, one, because so little was known of Bertha and two, because of the impact she had in supporting and furthering Ted’s career. The Deleuze concept of the two books allowed a space for Bertha to tell her own story whilst still maintaining the privacy she exercised in her daily life. It was importance to give Bertha a voice whilst still allowing her the space to exist in both the fiction and the fact of the verse novel. Bertha’s involvement in editing Ted’s writing gave her a deep understanding of concepts such as the Arandic belief that all people are inhabited by two souls, which can become visible at different points in
time. The background to Bertha’s story reveals major life events for Bertha including the loss of her mother as a young girl growing up in Adelaide, the support her father provided to help her through school, to when she met Ted at Adelaide University, their marriage, and their subsequent move to Central Australia. Bertha’s story is provided against the backdrop of an historical overview of Central Australia with particular attention given to the negative impact of Government policies on the daily lives of Indigenous people. The thesis demonstrates the effect white settlement had on Indigenous people at the time Bertha came to live in Central Australia. It was a period of upheaval and change in the political landscape and this is explored in the light of her interactions with the government of the day, including policies such as the removal of 'half-caste' children. This policy dates back to the 1920s, with the establishment of The Bungalow in Alice Springs and was to have direct effects on Bertha and Ted and their work in Central Australia. Bertha’s marriage to Ted enabled her to view the social and political changes of the time from a unique viewpoint, because, unlike many of the white people around her, she gained an appreciation of Aboriginal belief systems and the importance of the land to Aboriginal people. In her reading and editing of Ted's work she was exposed to the concept of a 'storied landscape', as it explains the physical structures of Central Australia in relation to the mythical beings and their role in the creation of the land. The role of women and the social attitudes and norms of the era within the desert landscape is explored through an examination of historical literature from the 20th century and also more recent research revealing both the profound difficulties faced by women of the era, as well as their resilience. My exploration into journal writing as a creative practice illustrates how journalling can be used as a generative process for the development and creation of the poetry arising from place. It reveals my own personal connections to the country and the landscape of Central Australia and the links between Bertha and myself.

I’ve examined the Aboriginal literary canon with a particular focus on poetry to reveal how this writing impacts on Australian literature more broadly. I propose that this influence is contributing to the emergence of a new voice in Australian writing exploring place by eliciting the sounds and resonances of the landscape through language. Further, the discussion on the genre of the verse novel
demonstrates its emergence as a dynamic narrative for the exploration of the silences and gaps in the historical record and how poetry and poetics is an effective genre to explore the narrative of absence and loss.

Silence, and being silenced by history, are the pivotal themes of this work. The mostly unrecognised courage, resilience and social contribution shown by Bertha Strehlow throughout her life, provided the impetus for writing Bertha's story. Poetry became the means to 'find' her in what Wilkinson describes as the 'marginal spaces' of history (2012, p. 96), allowing an alternative exploration of historical biography. Bertha’s story in poetry helps to broadens the picture of Central Australia, to one in which it is possible to hear the voices of other women, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, calling from the past. Through this work, Bertha’s voice can be heard and her legacy acknowledged.
Reference List

Adelaide Advertiser 1936 ‘Alleged Shooting in Native Reserve’, 2 July 1936, p. 17

Adelaide Advertiser 1935 ‘Gown of Albino Skin for Tonight’s Bride’, 21 December 1935, Bertha Strehlow file, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Albiston, J 1998 The Hanging of Jean Lee, Black Pepper Press, Melbourne


Allison, D 2012 Fairweather’s Raft, Walleah Press, North Hobart, pp. 77–82


Attwood, B 2005 Telling the truth about Aboriginal History, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, pp. 169–70


Austin-Broos, D 2009 Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 3 & 45

Australian Archives NT CA 1115, Patrol Officer Alice Springs and Jay Creek CRS:F 126, Item: 37


Ballou, E 2009 The Darwin Poems, University of Western Australia Press, Perth


Benn Perrurle, B 2010 Billy Benn, IAD Press, Alice Springs, p. 2


Berry, C 2011 Back cover comment for Libby Hart’s This Floating World, Five Islands Press, Melbourne


Bishop, C 2008 ‘She has the Native Interests too Much at Heart’: Annie Lock’s Experiences as a Single, White Female Missionary to Aborigines, 1903–


Brophy, K 2003 *Explorations in Creative Writing*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp. 86–7


Buchanan, I 2000 *Deleuzism – A Metacommentary*, Duke University, Durham, USA, pp. 3–9


Clarke, P 2003 *Where Ancestors Walked Australia as an Aboriginal Landscape*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 139 & 141


Cobby Eckermann, A 2012 *Ruby Moonlight*, Magabala Press, Broome

Coetzee, JM 2008 *Diary of a Bad Year*, Viking, New York, p. 104


Cole, T 1988 *Hell West and Crooked*, Collins Australia, Sydney

Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra 2001 *Kulgera SG53-05*, scale 1:2500 000, Australian Surveying and Land Information Group, map 99/107, Canberra

Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra 2001 *Petermann Ranges SG52-072001*, scale 1:2500 000, Australian Surveying and Land Information Group, map 01/008, Canberra


Cowan 1997 The mapmaker’s dream, Vintage, Sydney


Dark, E 1940 The Timeless Land, Angus & Robertson, Sydney

Davidson, L 1999 ‘Stone’ in Below the Waterline, 31 Australian writers choose their best short stories, ed. Garry Disher, Flamingo, Sydney, p. 337


Dean, M nd, ‘Bertha Strehlow’, unpublished epigraph for Tatler’s Club, University of Adelaide, pp. 1–3

Deleuze, G 1997 ‘Literature and Life’, Chapter 1, Essays Critical and Clinical, Trans. D Smith & M Greco, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 3


Dennis, CJ 1957 (1916) The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke, Angus & Robertson, Sydney


Drahos, T 2013 ‘The Imagined Desert’ in Placescape, placemaking, placedness – geography and cultural production, Special Issue of Coolabah, eds. B Boyd & R Norman, No. 11, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Edmond, M 2013 Battarbee and Namatjira, Giromondo, Sydney


Eliot, TS 1943 Four Quarters, Faber & Faber, New York
Erberhard, A 2004 *Jane, Lady Franklin*, Black Pepper, Melbourne, pp. 3, 32, 72 & 105

Evans, BI 1944 (1940) *A Short History of English Literature*, Pelican Books, New York, pp. 8–9


Finlayson, HH 1935 *The Red Centre*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney


Galt-Smith, B 2004 ‘That’s the right way and there’s no mystery about that: Demystifying the Strehlow Research Centre’ in *Traditions in the midst of change ... Strehlow Conference 2002 proceedings*, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, NTG, p. 205

Giles, E 1875 *Geographic Travels in Central Australia 1872–74*, M’Carron, Bird & Co., Melbourne


Gill, SD 1998 *Storytracking Texts, Stories and Histories in Central Australia*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 19, 38–9


Gosse, WC & Libraries Board of South Australia, 1973 (1874) *WC Gosse’s explorations, 1873: report and diary of Mr. WC Gosse’s central and western exploring expedition, 1873*, Adelaide Government Printer, 1874, Libraries Board of South Australia


Groom, A 1950 *I saw a strange land*, Angus & Robertson, Melbourne


Harris, J 1990 *One Blood 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*, Albatross Books, Sydney, pp. 385–9


Harrison, M 2008 ‘A breath of wind on a summer night’ in *Wild Bees, New and Selected Poems*, University of Western Australia Press, p. 72


Hetherington, P 2012 ‘Dancing in the open: The encounter with poetry and eruptions of the unknown’ in *Encounters: refereed proceedings of the 17th annual*
Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference  


Hill, B 2001 The Inland Sea, Salt, London, pp. 82, 86 & 93


Hirsch, E 1999 How to read a poem, Harcourt, New York, pp. xii & 3


Holmes, K 2011 Between the Leaves: Stories of Australian Women, Writing and Gardens, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, pp. 4–5


Hutchinson, J 2009 ‘Introduction’ in Fishtails in the Dust writing from the Centre, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs, p. 6

Inkamala, M 2006 ‘My Place’ in The milk in the sky, ed. J Hutchinson, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs, p. 117


Issacs, J 1987 Bush Food; Aboriginal Food and Herbal Medicine, Weldons Publishing, Sydney, p. 210


James, D 2009 *Painting the song Kaltjiti artists of the sand dune country*, McCulloch & McCulloch with Kaltjiti Arts, p. 20

James, G 1936 Letter to TGH Strehlow, 13 July 1936, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

James, G 1936 Telegram to TGH Strehlow, 29 April 1936, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Jones, G 2010 Personal communication, 4x4 Writing Masterclass, University of Adelaide, August 2010


Katakarinja, H 2010 ‘The pain rains’ in *This country anytime, anywhere*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, pp. 4–7


Keats, J 1975 ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in *The World’s Contracted Thus: major poetry from Chaucer to Plath*, eds. JK & JL McKenzie, Heinemann, Melbourne, p. 162


Kemp, J 2008 ‘Generative Skills Writing Workshop’, unpublished workshop handout, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne

240


Kinnane, S 2003 *Shadow lines*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, pp. 35–6


Lester, Y 1993 Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester, IAD Press, Alice Springs


Little, D 2004 ‘Memories of Bertha Strehlow’, Desert Honeymoon Exhibition, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, p. 2

Ling, T 2011 Commonwealth Records about the Northern Territory, National Archives of Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 131


Lyon, P & Parsons, M 1989 We are staying – The Alyawarre Struggle for land at Lake Nash, IAD Press, Alice Springs, pp. 7–10

MacDonald, R 1995 Between Two Worlds, IAD Press, Alice Springs p. 20


Mahood, K 2000 Craft for a Dry Lake, Anchor, Sydney, pp. 106–7

Manne, R 2010 ‘WEH Stanner: The Anthologist as Humanist’ in WEH Stanner: The Dreaming & Other Essays, Black Inc., Collingwood, p. 9

Marcus, J 2005 (2001) This Indomitable Miss Pink – A life in Anthropology, UNSW Press, Sydney, pp. 72–77

Markus, A 1990 Governing Savages, Allen & Unwin, Sydney


McGrath, A 1987 Born in the cattle: Aborigines in cattle country, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards

McKenna, M 2006 ‘Writing the Past’ in The Best Australian Essays, ed. D Modjeska, Black Inc., Melbourne, pp. 96–110

McLaren, P 2010 Murder in Utopia, Cockatoo Books, Kennedy

McLaren, P 2001 There’ll be New Dreams, Magabala Books, Broome


Mirritji, J 1983 (1976) My People’s Life, Milingimbi School Literature Production Centre, Milingimbi, Northern Territory, p. 8

Mitchell, S 2006 Desert Honeymoon Exhibition, Media Release 5 June 2006, Strehlow Research Centre, Department of Natural Resources, Environment and Arts, Northern Territory Government, Darwin

Mooney, M 2005 For the Dry Country, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs

Muecke, S 1983 ‘Introduction’ in Gularabulu Stories from the West Kimberley, with
P Roe, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, pp. iii, vii–viii

Vaaron-Morel, IAD Press, Alice Springs

Neidjie, B 1985 Kakadu Man, Mybrood Publishing, Sydney

Nelson, C 2007 ‘Faking it: History and Creative Writing’ in TEXT Journal, Vol. 11,
p. 1

NG Art Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 2010 Billy Benn Perrurle–To paint every hill,
viewed 23 January 2015

Nicholson Kerdijk, N 2010 Possession: poems about the voyage of Lt James Cook in
the Endeavour 1768–1771, Five Islands Press, Melbourne


Oliver, M 2004 (1979) Wild Geese Selected poems, Bloodaxe Books,
Northumberland, p. 63

Oliver, M 1994 A Poetry Handbook, Harcourt, New York, pp. 75, 84 & 92–4


Page, G 2009 ‘Emily Ballou’s The Darwin Poems’, reviewed on The Book Show,
Radio National, 4 May 2009,
http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/emily-ballou’s-the-
darwin-poems-review/3152780, viewed 20 May 2013

Page, G 2006 80 Great Poems, UNSW Press, Sydney, p. 15

Paisley, F 2005 ‘“For a Brighter Day”’: Constance Ternent Cooke’in Uncommon
Paisley, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra pp. 17296

Paisley, F 2000 Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women’s
Rights 1919–1939, MUP, Melbourne, pp. 20 & 32


Penman, S 1986 Here be dragons, Fontana Books, Glasgow

Pfisterer, S & Pickett, C 1999 Playing with ideas: Australian women playwrights

244
Giving voice to silence

from the suffragettes to the sixties, Currency Press, Sydney, p. 225

Pinsky, R 1999 The sounds of poetry; a brief guide, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, p. 9


Porter, D 1999 What a piece of work, Picador, Sydney, pp. 40 & 93

Porter, D 1992 Akhenaten, Picador, Sydney


Radke, O 2014 Personal Communication, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, 7 November 2014


Reynolds, H 2005 Nowhere people, Viking Books, Melbourne

Reynolds, H 1998 This Whispering in our Hearts, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 192–3


Rilke, RM 2000 (1903) Letters to a Young Poet, New World Library, Novato, CA, p. 11


Roe, P 1983 Gularabulu Stories from the West Kimberley, with S Muecke, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle


Rose, DR 2004 Reports from a Wild Country – ethics for decolonisation, UNSW Press, Sydney, p. 162

Rowse, T 2012 Rethinking social justice; from ‘peoples’ to ‘populations’, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 45–61


Rubuntja W & Green, J 2002 The town grew up dancing – the life and art of Wenten Rubuntja, Jukurrpa Books, IAD Press, Alice Springs

Saddler, P nd ‘Bertha Strehlow’, unpublished epigraph for Tatler’s Club, University of Adelaide, pp. 1–2
Leni Shilton
Giving voice to silence

San Roque, C 2002 “‘Black and White’ and the “Things Between Us” – Some ideas on the psychology of cultural relationships’, CARPA Newsletter, Issue 34, Central Australian Rural Practitioners Association, Alice Springs, October 2002

Santospirito, J 2013 Craig San Roque’s ‘The Long Weekend in Alice Springs’, San Kesslo Publications, Hobart

Saunders, B 2012 Looking for Bullin Bullin, Hybrid Publishers, Melbourne


Schultz, P nd ‘Perspective and the Persona Narrator’, The Writers’ Studio Workshop Handout, Dublin Writers Festival, Culture Box, Temple Bar Cultural Trust, Dublin, 25 May 2014


Sheppard, NL 2000 ‘Introduction’ in Munyi’s Daughter – A spirited Brumby, N Barnes, Seaview Press, Henley Beach, p. v


Shilton, L 2015 ‘If I speak from under the earth’ in Giving voice to silence, unpublished PhD thesis, Southern Cross University, p. 61

Shilton, L 2009 ‘In search of mint’ in Fishtails in the dust, writing from the Centre, ed. J Hutchinson, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs, p. 116

Smith, R 2009 “‘Stuff at the core of land rights claims”: the Strehlow collection’ in A Powell (ed.) Journal of Northern Territory History, No. 20, p. 70


Spencer, B & Gillen, FJ 1899 The Native Tribes of Central Australia, Macmillan & Co., London

Spencer, B & Gillen, FJ 1899 Native Tribes of Central Australia, Macmillan, London

247

Strehlow, B 1960, Letter to Ted Strehlow, 9 July 1960, viewed at Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs 28 June 2013, courtesy of J Strehlow

Strehlow, B 1955, Letters to Ted Strehlow, 24 September 1955, viewed at Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs 28 June 2013, courtesy of J Strehlow


Strehlow, B 1940 ‘Through Central Australia’ in *Walkabout*, Vol. 6, No. 10, 1 August 1940, pp. 9 & 11

Strehlow, B 1936 Letter to Frieda Strehlow, unpublished, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, pp. 1–4

Strehlow, B 1935 Letter to Ted Strehlow, Correspondence file, held at the Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, B 1933 Letter to Ted Strehlow, Correspondence file, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Strehlow, F 1936 Letter to Bertha Strehlow, 18 November 1936, [108/36], Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, J 2013 Personal communication, 14 July, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Strehlow, J 2011 *The Tale of Frieda Keysser: Investigations into a Forgotten Past,*
Strehlow, J 2004 ‘Recollections of my mother, Bertha Strehlow’, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, pp. 1–8

Strehlow, J 2004 ‘About Bertha Strehlow’, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, p. 3

Strehlow, R 2006 ‘My mother in law’, Bertha Strehlow file, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, p. 2


Strehlow, TGH 1971 Songs of Central Australia, Angus & Robertson, Sydney

Strehlow, TGH 1970 Letter to Charles Duguid, 31 July 1970, Correspondence folder: Duguid/Elkin/Ellis, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Strehlow, TGH 1955 Field Diary XIX, unpublished, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Strehlow, TGH 1938 ‘Report re Half-caste Maggie from Mount Cavenagh Station’, 2 August 1938, AA CRS F126, Item 27, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Strehlow, TGH 1937 Personal Diary No. 3, 1937, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, TGH 1936 Field Diary II, 1936/1937, unpublished, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, TGH 1936 Field Diary XI, 1936–37, unpublished, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, TGH 1936 Film Recordings, 1936 Petermann Expedition, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, TGH 1932 Field Diary, unpublished, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs

Strehlow, TJ 2006 ‘In Memoriam of my mother, Bertha Strehlow’, Bertha Strehlow file, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, p. 1


12 March 2013, p. 1


Tóibín, C 2014 *Nora Webster*, Picador, London


U’Ren, J 2014 Personal communication, 27 July 2014, Alice Springs


Wall, M 2008 *Native Tongue – A tribute to Bertha Strehlow*, unpublished, Tatlers Club, Adelaide
Wallace, K & Lovell, J 2009 *Listen deeply: Let these stories in*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, p. 21


White, VJ 1941 Letter to TGH Strehlow, 17 April 1941, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs


Williamson, G 2012 *The Burning Library – Our great novelists lost and found*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, p. 43

Winterson, J 2012 *Why be happy when you can be normal?* Vintage, London, pp. 42 & 115

Winton, T 2014 ‘In conversation’ at the *Dublin Writers Festival*, Smock Alley Theatre, Temple Bar, Dublin, 25 May 2014

Woolf, V 1929 *A Room of One’s Own*, accessed through Feedbooks, [http://www.feedbooks.com](http://www.feedbooks.com) 30 July 2014, pp. 24 & 32


Wright, A 2006 *Carpentaria*, Giramondo, Sydney

Wright, A 2009 Back cover comment, *Fishtails in the dust Writing from the Centre*, ed. J Hutchinson, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs