

Chapter 5: The Red Centre  
From *Arthur Murch, An Artist's Life*  
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Six weeks in the Central Australian desert in the midsummer heat ? It was not everyone's idea of a holiday, but for Murch, and the three young Sydney doctors it was an adventure right out of *Boy's Own Annual*. Harold Whitridge Davies the distinguished third Professor of Physiology at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Medicine (1930-1946) had a grant from the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation. He was going to Central Australia in January 1933 to test Aboriginal endurance in summer heat and with little water. They met in December 1932 at Professor Whitridge Davies's family home in St. Peters, Adelaide where the Energy Research Expedition plans were outlined: Doctors John Antill Pockley, Hugh Barry and Maurice Joseph would assist with the testing. The "Prof" who frequently sailed with him on Windeyer's yacht invited Murch to join the Research Expedition because he wanted him to paint the life and people of the so-called 'dead' heart of Australia. He would also be called to 'lend a hand' whenever needed. They would all live for six months among the Aboriginal subjects and under the same conditions at the Finke River Lutheran Mission. In temperatures over a century, and with heat dust and flies, they would measure the amount of water their subjects would drink, against the loss in urine and sweat.(1)

Hedley Marston lived near Professor Davies in Adelaide. He had earlier arranged for Murch to carry out a design for the memorial to his colleague Brailsford Robertson at the University of Adelaide. Over the Christmas holiday, he had Murch make a pencil portrait of him and of his C.S.I.R. colleague, Sir Charles Martin, then Professor of Biochemistry and General Physiology in the University.(2)

The senior members of the Energy team Dr S.Halcro Wardlaw and Stanley Larnach, the naturalist, met up with them at the railway station in Adelaide on January 5<sup>th</sup>. Between them all there was a mountain of baggage to pack on the train. It included scientific equipment and a truck to carry it all from the railhead at Alice Springs to their destination Hermannsburg, 80 miles from Alice Springs. It was a day's journey on 'the Ghan' to Quorn. Then a two day luxury trip to Alice Springs with sleeping and dining cars and an observation carriage. Hugh Barry and John Pockley decided to grow moustaches on the trip. Judging by his self portrait Murch did not appear to shave at all in Central Australia.

The train was an hour and a half late. It whistled for the last mile or so before reaching Alice Springs late in the afternoon of January 7, 1933. Past

the Heavitree gap with its cradling mountain pass. A curious crowd of aborigines and outlying station dwellers were there to greet them.

There were 600 inhabitants and most of them seemed to be in town. It was buzzing with news of the gold boom at the Granites and of murder. A corpse had been found near the diggings and the suspects were being held at the police station. The writer Ernestine Hill was in town to report on the Granites gold boom. John Pockley was met by his friend, Dr David Brown, the only medical man in Central Australia.

His house was next door to the Stuart Arms the oldest pub in town. A little self consciously because the *Adelaide Advertiser* story had drawn the crowd's attention to the expedition, the team unloaded their gear. In search of a thirst quencher, they met the disapproving scrutiny of the barmaid. It did not take her long to sort them out. She was unimpressed. She wiped her eyes and delivered judgement. "When I heard you all had come thousands of miles to the desert to measure the Aborigines' piss I nearly died laughing."(3)

Two days later on January 9, they loaded their gear on the three-ton truck and set out on the 80 mile trip to Hermannsburg.

Hermannsburg, born of evangelistic zeal and heroism belongs to a unique of almost forgotten history of Aboriginal missionary endeavour in Australia. The Finke River Mission Station, a dilapidated old cattle run, was bought in 1894 by the Lutheran Immanuel Synod in South Australia. Carl Friedrich Strehlow (1871-1922) (4) took over the remote station in October that year.

A remarkable scholar and devoted missionary, Strehlow was strict in the handling of the mission's theological and educational role. He was sympathetic with the spirituality of Aboriginal culture, but never doubted the rightness of the Mission's evangelising role. He made a study of Aboriginal culture and languages, and translated the bible into Aranda for the Mission people. His writings published in Germany in seven volumes (Stadtisches Volker-Museum Frankfurt (Germany) 1907-20) aroused great interest in Europe.

Strehlow's researches on Aboriginal culture and totemism were neglected in Australia, largely thanks to the scepticism of the anthropologist Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer. From 1894 to 1922 Strehlow carried on the backbreaking pioneer work at Hermannsburg. He left the mission only four times, once to get married. Worn out with his hardships and desperately ill he left Hermannsburg for the last time in 1922 to get medical help in Adelaide, With his wife and teen age son Theodor, he set out in a homemade horse-drawn cart, got only as far as Horseshoe Bend, 240km from Adelaide. On

October 20, 1922, Carl Strehlow died . Forty-seven years later in 1969, Theodor wrote his father's epitaph *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, (5) a moving record of the event.

With the setting sun on January 10, 1933, Professor Davies and his research team reached Hermannsburg, tired from their truck and donkey-team journey over tortuous dirt road, through scrub and spinifex. They were relieved when they skirted the Krischauf range and a few native wurleys and the white buildings of the Mission came into view.

After the Aborigines and Strehlow's successor Pastor Albrecht and his wife Minna had made them welcome, they were treated to a huge meal in the German style. Not the most suitable in the circumstances - the night was hot and the air heavy with clouds that promised but would not deliver the longed-for drought-breaking rain. Sleeping quarters for the party were arranged, and duties allotted. Murch shared with John Pockley who was appointed meteorologist. They all relaxed. The 'Prof' got out his gramophone and all of the lads of the village came over for a 'smoko'. They retired to bed too tired to notice the swarms of mosquitoes that descended as soon as the lamps went out. Next morning unloading the gear they found that the sensitive balance, which was to measure the Aborigines' sweat and urine, was intact, but the refrigerator would not work. It was no use for laboratory needs or keeping the Professor's grog cool. Some jars of pickled cabbage were unpacked, and Albrecht, overcome with nostalgia, said to his wife Minna: 'Look Mama s-s-saurkraut!'

They could not have brought a more acceptable treat. Although the Missions 1,000 mile cattle run supplied basic food and employment for one hundred and sixty aborigines and white administrators, the supply of fresh foods depended on scarce water. The Finke varied from a trickle to a torrent, and could not be relied upon to grow any sustainable crop. During the 1926-29 drought there was no green food at all. The Aborigines developed scurvy and berri berri; 85 per cent of all infants and children died. Professor Davies made a report to the Health Department which met an early response. An officer of the Department visited Hermannsburg and ordered whole grain, replace white flour and oranges made a general issue.

In 1933 Theodor Strehlow was 25 years old, committed to carrying on the work of his scholarly father, dividing his time between work at the Anthropology Department in Adelaide University and Hermannsburg. Like his three brothers who were born at Hermannsburg he looked on the Aborigines as brothers. John Pockley and Stanley Larnach were planning a trip on camelback to Mount Liebig. They would spend two weeks travelling 100 miles west of Hermannsburg in country inhabited by desert tribes, but inhospitable for the inexperienced white travellers. Theodor recommended

they take the tracker Hezekial as a guide. Hezekial could speak English and German as well as his native Aranda. Theodor and Albrecht were proud of his sophistication but regretted they could not make a Christian of him. John Pockley, who was critical of the Mission's use of black evangelists to break down tribal religions, applauded Hezekial's stance. But he gave the Lutherans full marks for protecting Aborigines from the 'religious observances' of white society - alcohol, and the exploitation of Aboriginal women.

On January 26, 1933 Pockley, Murch and Larnach, set out for their great adventure. They had four riding camels and one pack camel and carried food and provisions, nine gallons of water and nine gallons of formalin for Larnach's specimens. They hoped to be back at Hermannsburg in two weeks before running out of supplies. It was in the Mount Liebig region that Larnach hoped to find a specimen of the *Notoryctes*, a blind marsupial mole thought to be extinct (6). Murch wanted to paint the real desert. Pockley took a movie camera to record their travels and a rifle to supplement their food supplies. Pockley had taken camel riding lessons from 'Bony Beam' Tilmuth, the Afghan mailman, who warned him to be vigilant - camels could kick with both fore and hind legs, and would stand up suddenly the minute a foot went into the stirrup. Murch's portrait of the mailman is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

They travelled about 120 miles without seeing people. Hezekial pointed out track marks of a woman and a child. He tracked them to a waterhole where they found twenty or so women and children, but no men. Hezekial spoke to them: they were friendly. Larnach filled hypodermic syringes with water and squirted it playfully like a water pistol. It was a great success, and they all lined up for their turn to be squirted. Towards evening the men returned, and with two nine-or-ten-year-old boys smeared with red ochre. They had just been taken from the care of the women to that of the men, to learn the male skills of relationship and of hunting, and ultimately to be circumcised. There were about 50 men decorated with designs in red ochre and clay, the designs outlined in feathers which were glued to their chests with blood. These were Ngalias, a tribe who had had little contact with Europeans. They were friendly and stayed and camped the night with them. Pockley gave them some rabbits he had shot. In the light of the camp fire they sang songs of familiar animals - possums and flying ducks. The 'duck flying away' song had an effective but rather frightening rhythm. To return the hospitality, the three whites tried to give some idea of their own culture. Pockley regretted not having a gramophone. Their own repertoire was pathetically limited. They sang choruses from the Messiah and various hymns. The Aboriginal audience was polite but unmoved. 'Nellie Bly Caught a Fly', however, was a real hit and they demanded encores.

Murch was lyrical about the country. He wrote: 'The massive ten miles of Mount Liebig rise in abrupt vertical cliff faces 3,000 feet about the plain. It was in this setting that I met and painted the desert aborigines, the strongly featured and diverse personalities of the of the Arunta, Ngalia, and Pentu Pui people.' (7)

Pockley was so impressed that he wrote in his diary on January 17, 1933: 'The colours in the evening clouds stretched from horizon to horizon and ranged through the spectrum. Even when looking at the display one hardly believes it. The red earth reflected back from the clouds and the dust in the light of the setting sun again coloured the ranges so that the plains seemed heliotrope and Mount Sonder and Mount Zeil away to the North turned purple.' Murch said, 'If I tried to paint this people in the south would think me mad!'

They travelled in the early morning and evening and rested in the middle of the day. At times Murch could not make the detailed notes he would have liked and Pockley noted that he fretted when he had to press on to areas where Larnach's specimens were thought to be found. It was not here but at Ooldea that Larnach found the prized specimen. (8)

In John Pockley's opinion 'riding a camel must be about the most monotonous form of entertainment.' He carried on his mount an uncomfortably long-barrelled single-shot, two-bore rifle 'with a hell of a kick and tremendous range'. He was a crack shot, holder of the University of Sydney's Regimental Medal, and kept them supplied with welcome fresh food. They ate 'porcupine', and found it rich and tender. They ate rabbits and other game cooked in the native way - whole, on the ashes. Murch carried in his saddlebags fifty pounds of sugar and flour, with which they made damper. They traded sugar, flour and tea with Aborigines for churingas, pitchis and hunting weapons. With their limited medical supplies - aspirin, iodine and potassium permanganate - Pockley treated sick Aborigines. The sicknesses ranged from minor injuries to suppurating ulcers. Some of the people were dying of tuberculosis. The most horrible case was a man with a wound sustained in a 'payback' feud. The man's foot had rotted to the bone after an injudicious spear wound to the leg. It was to have been a mere reproof for a breach of etiquette - insufficient grief at the death of a relative - but it pierced a vital artery and cost the man his foot. (9)

When Murch packed up in early February 1933 to go home, he was already looking forward to a return trip to the Centre again with Professor Davies. Meanwhile he was under some pressure to get his paintings and drawings finished for the exhibition in May 1933 at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. In his six weeks with the research team he had travelled thousands of miles, some on camelback and produced 45 works. Not a bad result.

Although he spoke of the country, it was the people he most recalled in the years to come.

‘When I think of the Centre it is not just time or place but faces. I am looking back into memory to find who might be written into Australian history. The mailman Bony Beam Tilmuth, with his camel team and the longest mail run in Australia, from Oodnadatta to Tennant Creek in the Territory; Hezekial the Aboriginal guide; Allen the shy, sensitive Aranda Mission boy at Hermannsburg. I painted them and a portrait of Professor ‘Pete’ Whitridge Davies with his features lit by campfire in the fading desert glow.’ And then a postscript: ‘Too many whites were content to dismiss all Aborigines as, in the words of Dean Inge, “the lowest specimens of humanity”. I saw these words printed in the London Evening Standard and was so indignant that I went onto the BBC programme to tell the English what I had learned about Aborigines during my stay at Hermannsburg Mission.’

The next trip to the Centre, in the summer of 1933-34, was more leisurely. Murch travelled in his Baby Austin car, but ran out of petrol near Mount Liebigh and had to walk 60 miles through rugged country where men searching for the missing Southern Cross aircraft had recently starved to death. He was hopelessly lost until meeting Rolf the Aboriginal tracker, one of the experts who had searched for the gold prospector Lasseter. Rolf had been sent out from Hermannsburg to find Murch, and had already dug a water hole. The tracker said resentfully, as if Murch had been late for an appointment: "I have been here all morning in the hot sun waiting for you."

On this trip Murch made film records of the activities of the Aboriginal people.(10) He made comparisons with the art and craft works of the Mission community and of adults and children in the remote areas around Mt. Liebigh. He found a significant difference in styles. At the Mission they were used to drawing at easels and desks and produced side-elevated images of familiar animals - kangaroos and lizards. In the remoter areas, artists used a plan view and worked on the ground in the traditional way.

The film also shows Murch’s active participation in the Aboriginal’s activities; for example, boxing with one of the lads wearing boxing gloves Murch had fashioned from animal skins in the Mission tannery. Murch was unusual because he shared his artistic activities with the Aboriginal people. He carefully documented their artwork and took the trouble to study their technical processes, aesthetics values and responses to the environment.

## BUT WHAT OF THE UNIVERSITY ENERGY PARTY?

Apart from the great adventure and the many paintings it inspired, what if anything had resulted from Professor `Pete" Davies' energy metabolism project? In December 1991 I wrote to Sydney University, and Professor J. Young, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, put me in touch with Dr Maurice Francis. Murch, who died in September 1989, had never known what resulted from the Rockefeller-funded study. It would not have worried him one way or another, but here was Maurice Francis, one of the original members of the team, very much alive, a thoracic physician, still practising, still interested in all things concerning Hermannsburg. Surely he would know the answer. He had been back there many times since, piloting his aeroplane and taking his grandchildren for holidays.

Through Maurice I met Dr Hugh Barry, who had celebrated his 21st birthday at Hermannsburg and become an orthopaedic specialist and John Pockley's son Simon. We all met at Maurice's home in 1992. There on the walls, in boxes were many records of the expedition. But no real answers to my questions: Did the Aborigines have a different metabolism? Could they endure extremes of temperature and less water than Europeans?

There were only vague speculations about the Aborigines' environmental skills in conserving energy when looking for water, and in not going out in the midday sun. (11) My new acquaintances, however, were able to fill me in on what was happening in January 1933, while Murch, Pockley and Larnach were travelling on camelback to Mount Liebig. The stories were hilarious, at times more ribald than scientific. It was not an easy job at Hermannsburg, they told me, to measure the body wastes of Aborigines - urine, sweat, faeces- and compare it with their intakes - fluid and food. Many could not understand what the object was and did not care anyway. Given the sensitive nature of the tests and the difficulty of communicating with their subjects, the team devised methods which today seem less than ethical. During the night, in order to get a little sleep, they tied their hands to their subjects, so that they would know the minute 'nature called', and would be there with the tin-can specimen collector. The tricky part was getting the specimen into the cans. The male circumcision was not the usual round trim, but a long sub-incision under the penis which caused urine to spread out and trickle in every direction but the can. Some years later they were told by a district nurse that in local corroborees a tin can was passed ceremoniously around the group. Had the 1933 study entered into local lore?

No paper has been written on the Rockefeller Energy Research Expedition in 1932-33. All the participants in the event are now dead. The only trophies of the trip are Murch's 45 paintings, many of them in art galleries around Australia. Geoffrey Dutton once wrote 'The first artist to go into Central

Australia and draw the noble reality of the tribesmen living there was probably Arthur Murch." (12)

After his initial contacts, Murch did not return to Hermannsburg for another thirty years. In 1964 he made a trip to the Centre with his 12- year-old daughter, Michelle. It was financed by John Brackenreg, Director of the Artarmon Galleries who had always been interested in Aboriginal art and welfare. Michelle attended the Mission School while Murch taught the children and advised on technical training that would advance their art techniques and provide employment.

In 1987 he went again to Hermannsburg with Michelle, for the last time. He was 85, suffering from Alzheimer's Disease and no longer recognised the country that had inspired so many of his glowing paintings of the Gosse's Ranges and Mount Liebig and the Hermannsburg Mission.

1. 'Doctors to Study Aborigines' *Adelaide Advertiser*, January 4, 1933.
2. Portrait Sir Charles Martin, Basser College, National University, Canberra.
3. The University Party in Northern Territory, *Sunday Sun* and *Guardian*, April 2, 1933.
4. Carl Strehlow, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.
5. Theodor Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. Angus & Robertson, 1969
6. Ann Macintosh, 'Stanley Lorin Larnach, 1-1-1900-22-8-1978', *Arch & Phys. Anthropology in Oceania*, Vol. X111, 2 and 3, July and October, 1978, pp 167-176
7. Foreword exhibition. Victorian Fine Arts Society, May 1934.
8. Ann Macintosh, 'Stanley Lorin Larnach'.
9. John Francis Antill Pockley, ophthalmic surgeon, 8.6.12-22.2.91, journal notes. Family paper now published, *Flight of Ducks*, Journal John Pockley, Website.
10. Murch's 1934 film is in the National Film and Sound Archives, Canberra. Sequences have been used in the following:

Drawings and paintings by children from Hermannsburg, Arukun and Mlabunga, National Gallery Australia, 1994, 14 April – 20 May

*Aboriginal Art in Contemporary Australia* – Children's art at Hermannsburg, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies' Biennial Conference, May 1994.

*Arthur Murch* - Australia Council 1975 film by Meg Stewart, interviewer: Daniel Thomas.



Shaun McIlwraith, 'Art for Aborigines', *People*, August 25, 1965.

*Flight of Ducks*, Journal John Pockley Website  
<http://cinemedia.net.FOD/>.

11. University of Sydney, *Centenary Book of the Faculty of Medicine 1883-1993*, p 247
12. Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art*, MacMillan, Melbourne 1974, p7.