

## SPENCER AND GILLEN'S COLLABORATIVE FIELDWORK IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA AND ITS LEGACY

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### *Introduction*

THE collaborative fieldwork of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in Central Australia from 1894 to 1903 is well known; if not always for its own sake, then at least for the use that was made of it by James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, and others. From as early as 1904, however, a number of anthropologists have questioned their fieldwork methodology, their ability to speak to their informants in their own languages, and their relations with their Aboriginal informants (see, for example, Austin-Broos 1999). In this essay I discuss the importance of the large amount of material still extant from, or directly relating to, their fieldwork (a summary list of which is provided in the appendix), and the potential future uses to which this material could be put. In particular, through attention to the surviving documentation, I attempt to answer some of the criticisms that have been levelled at them and their fieldwork. I begin, however, with a short biographical introduction to both men, before considering in greater detail their fieldwork and the current interest in their surviving field journals, note books, and other materials.

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*Francis James Gillen*

Frank Gillen was born in South Australia in 1855. He received little formal education and from the age of eleven worked for the South Australian postal and telegraph service. Between 1870 and 1872, the overland telegraph was constructed, linking Melbourne and Sydney, via Adelaide and Darwin, to the undersea telegraph cable and thus to Europe. At the time, the South Australian government ran the Northern Territory, which was not a separate state as it is today. South Australia was thus responsible for operating the whole of the overland telegraph. Without it Spencer and Gillen would neither have met nor have been as successful as they undoubtedly were.

On 1 April 1872, Gillen became a telegraph operator. In 1875 he was promoted to work on the Port Darwin line. The telegraph system required repeater stations along the route to boost the Morse code signals. Twelve solid stone telegraph stations had been constructed, some of them built like small fortresses for fear of attack by Aborigines, at intervals of about 250 kilometres: at Beltana, Strangways Springs, The Peake, Charlotte Waters, Alice Springs, Barrow Creek, Tennant Creek, Powell Creek, Daly Waters, Katherine, Yam Creek, and Darwin. These stations were important places in the outback, providing focuses for White Central Australian society and locations for the handing out of rations to Aboriginal communities (see Rowse 1998).

Gillen kept a diary of his first journey from Adelaide to Central Australia in 1875, 'with a view of giving my Metropolitan friends a rough sketch of my first campaign in the Bush'.<sup>1</sup> The diary was written mainly to amuse, but it is also obvious from it that Gillen took the opportunity to converse with Aboriginal people. Significantly, he compiled a list of thirty male and female personal names and a vocabulary of some 200 words, set down phonetically. He spent the next twenty-four years in Central Australia, first at Charlotte Waters then at Alice Springs. During his twelve years at Charlotte Waters he collected his first systematic data on Aboriginal society and supplied E. M. Curr with a vocabulary of more than 100 words for his *The Australian Race*, published by the Victorian Government Printer in 1886 (see Gillen 1886).

On 1 December 1892, Gillen was appointed post and telegraph station master at Alice Springs. By that time, he was the most senior and experienced officer on the telegraph line, a magistrate, and sub-protector of Aborigines, while also dispensing medical advice and treatment to the local population, Aboriginal and White. He was an important figure in local life and had close relationships with other Central Australians. Although his official duties were onerous, throughout his stay in Central Australia he took a keen interest in the local Arrernte. This

<sup>1</sup> Gillen's diary is held in the H. K. Fry manuscript collection in the Anthropology Archives at the South Australian Museum (AA104). It has recently been published (see Robert S. Gillen 1995).

interest, and his sense of justice (he indicted a policeman for murder of a group of Aboriginal people—an action unprecedented at that time), allowed him to become a close friend to many Arrernte and to be accepted into their society.

### *Walter Baldwin Spencer*

Gillen's future partner, Walter Baldwin Spencer, was born in 1860 in Manchester, England, where his father was a successful businessman. He studied at Owens College, working towards a medical degree, before transferring to the University of Oxford where he studied natural sciences. During his time at Oxford he attended E. B. Tylor's first series of anthropological lectures and helped with the practical arrangements for the transfer of the founding Pitt Rivers collection from South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), where it had previously been displayed, to the University Museum in Oxford.

In 1887, a year after Gillen's first contribution to Aboriginal studies had been published, Spencer was appointed foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne, a post he held until he retired. Spencer was an enthusiastic and charismatic teacher who encouraged women to study science and believed in the importance of field trips for all natural scientists. In 1899 he was appointed Honorary Director of the National Museum of Victoria, a job he held for nearly thirty years, in addition to his professorship. Today he is far better known as an anthropologist than as a zoologist, his putative profession throughout his working life, but his work as a scientist, academic, and director of a major Australian museum should not be forgotten.

### *Spencer and Gillen*

Spencer and Gillen met when the Horn Scientific Expedition, on which Spencer was the zoologist, visited Alice Springs in 1894. The expedition was financed by W. A. Horn, a mining magnate, pastoralist, and politician, to carry out geological and mineralogical appraisals, to review the flora and fauna, and to obtain records of the Aboriginal inhabitants. After the main expedition left Alice Springs, Spencer stayed on, at Gillen's house, to complete his zoological studies. Once Spencer returned to Melbourne, a correspondence began. The two men initially kept in contact so that Spencer could obtain further Central Australian zoological specimens, but they soon decided to collaborate on research into Aboriginal society and material culture.

Their surviving letters, published in *My Dear Spencer* (Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch (eds) 1997), demonstrate their growing friendship and shared intellectual interest in the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Alice Springs area. Spencer was

asked by Horn to prepare for publication the work of the scientific expedition, eventually published in four volumes in 1896 (Spencer 1896). One of the volumes dealt with anthropology and was mostly written by Edward Stirling, the 'anthropologist' on the expedition, with a separate section written by Gillen (without the information he had obtained after the departure of the Horn Expedition). Even before the Horn report was published, however, Spencer and Gillen had begun the research that would lead to their first joint publication, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Spencer and Gillen 1899). This was primarily a result of the fieldwork they carried out together in Alice Springs, though it also drew on Gillen's own work in the area after Spencer had returned to Melbourne.

Howard Morphy's introductory essay in *My Dear Spencer* (Morphy 1997) positions Spencer and Gillen's fieldwork in the context of nineteenth-century anthropology and its later developments. He shows that they were among the very first to practise the form of anthropological fieldwork later termed 'participant observation'. It seems likely that they did so in part because Gillen lived with, and was trusted by, many of their informants, but also perhaps because Spencer's training as a biologist led him to want to test hypotheses by direct observation.

After their partnership began, Gillen took advantage of living in Alice Springs to check facts, attend ceremonies, and interview Arrernte informants. As P. M. Byrne, a fellow Central Australian remarked in a letter to Spencer in September 1896, 'Gillen is still at work with undiminished energy and the wail of the tormented Native is loud in the Land' (see Mulvaney, Petch, and Morphy 2000: 244). A glimpse of Gillen's research methods may also be obtained from the following extract from his letter to Spencer of 14–18 July 1896 about an incident involving Mounted Constable E. C. Cowle and an Aboriginal prisoner referred to here as 'Friday' (see Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch 1997: 133):<sup>2</sup>

Cowle arrived this morning and with a pang, which I feel still, I was obliged to commit the prisoner 'Friday' to gaol for six months hard—After the court proceedings were finished I took him to my den where for three quarters of an hour I questioned him closely when suddenly, to my horror, he reeled and fell up against the black tracker to whom he was chained. I quickly shunted him into the open air where I administered some sal volatile [smelling salts] after swallowing which, he fainted and did not rally for about half an hour. Cowle made characteristic remarks about the questions being worse than the sentence but this did not deter me from tackling him again this afternoon when I went through the table of relationships and various other matters.

Cowle's account of the incident, in a letter to Spencer of 22 September 1896, was also written in a humorous vein (see Mulvaney, Petch, and Morphy 2000: 91):

<sup>2</sup> Sadly, this account shows that, liberal though he was by the standards of his times, Gillen often chained prisoners to one another or to Aboriginal police trackers.

Did Gillen tell you that my prisoner took his sentence most impassively and only murmured that—'crimson lubra bin make him kill cattle'—but when he got at him in his den and unfolded a papyrus as long as himself and started to trace his descent through endless aunts, and great great grandfather's mothers he fainted away completely! Gillen was flying around with 'Sal Volatile' but I was calm as I could prove I landed him there with a full stomach, and in the event of an inquest would have pointed out that the cause of death was 'Gillen unwatered'...

By comparison, Spencer's behaviour in the field can be gained from an account by J. A. Gilruth, Administrator of the Northern Territories, published in *The Argus* on 3 August 1929 (quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 176):

To see him sitting...with little shelter from the torrid sun, examining and cross-examining several grimy, elderly natives...patiently sorting out the material so difficult to secure from individuals more anxious to please...than to convey facts.... To realise that information so laboriously acquired and so meticulously noted would be checked again and again...

During the summer of 1896–97 Spencer and Gillen conducted their first joint fieldwork adjacent to the telegraph station in Alice Springs. While of only three months' duration, this was the longest single sustained period in nineteenth-century Australia of what would today be recognized as anthropological field research. It cemented the men's relationship and their collaboration. They lived in a 'wurley' or bough shelter close to the ceremonial ground and watched and participated in a long series of ceremonies they called the 'Engwura'. Before Spencer arrived from Melbourne (a long and difficult journey in itself, involving a seemingly interminable train journey via Adelaide to Oodnadatta and then a wagon or camel journey from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs), Gillen made preparations, writing on 8 October 1896 (see Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch (eds) 1997: 145):

The Engwura ceremony will begin the day after you arrive and will last at least a week—If we! are to see everything that goes on it will be necessary for us to live at the Camp—A death or a serious row amongst them at this juncture would burst up the whole thing, a Calamity which may the Lord in his infinite wisdom forbid.... Now I must conclude, I do hope nothing will turn up to prevent your coming.

He wrote again after the Engwura on 9 February 1897 (see *ibid.*: 147):

I cannot help wishing that we could live our Engwura life over again though I confess it was an anxious time for me, there was always a danger of the thing bursting up and I dreaded anything of the sort happening, much more for your sake than for my own.

The information they obtained from their joint fieldwork at the Engwura, and from Gillen's field research (often prompted by questions from Spencer in Melbourne), was finally published by Macmillan in 1899 as *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. This was quickly recognized as a seminal piece of work and was, as is well known, used as the basis for further anthropological theorizing by, amongst others, James Frazer and Emile Durkheim. Spencer and Gillen's surviving correspondence documents the process by which the book was written, with Gillen supplying voluminous data, comment, and criticism, and Spencer providing interpretations and the publishable text.

In addition to collecting data from the Arrernte, Gillen also collected artefacts. He kept many of the objects he obtained (most of these were later sent to Australian museums), but also sent similar objects to Spencer in Melbourne (which later found their way into the collections of the National Museum of Victoria), and to museum collections both at home (for example, the South Australian Museum in Adelaide) and abroad (for example, the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum). It is likely that Gillen obtained most of these artefacts through processes of exchange with Arrernte people, but his early methods of object acquisition did include what he later recognized to be the theft of Aboriginal sacred objects. In common with other European Central Australians, in his early work he took *churinga*, properly *tywerrenge*, from 'storehouses'. The word *tywerrenge* is actually best glossed as 'sacred' or 'precious', but Spencer and Gillen used it to mean the sacred stones or sticks of the Arrernte people. The following extract from a letter Gillen wrote to Spencer on 30 July 1897 shows that the ramifications of this pilaging of ceremonial objects did not at first occur to him (see Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch (eds) 1997: 178):<sup>3</sup>

Evidently you are chortling with keen appreciation of your collection and I must confess that I am a bit anxious to see it—Do you think you have a little of everything and is there any special line in which you are weak, if so let me know—A nigger arrived from Ilyaba today—sent in, I suspect, to see if the Camels have arrived—and brought half a dozen of the Arungquilta sticks a la Irrunturinya. You can have two or three more if you like and later on I hope to send you the Arungquiltha spear and woomera arrangement—Martin tells me—this between ourselves—that an old man out in his locality has been killed for divulging locality of Churinga to Cowle—This upsets me terribly, I would not have had it happen for 100 pounds and I am going to write Cowle strongly about the Churinga business, there must be no more ertnatulinga robberies. I bitterly regret ever having countenanced such a thing and can only say that I did so when in ignorance of what they meant to the Natives—To fully realize this one requires to go as I did a few weeks ago with bush natives

<sup>3</sup> Gillen's language in his letters is occasionally offensive to the modern reader. For a discussion of his use of such terms as 'nigger', see Mulvaney 1997: 14.

to their ertnatulinga and watch them reverently handling their treasures—It impressed me far more than anything else I have witnessed.

The killing, to which Gillen refers, of an Aboriginal man connected with the robbery of sacred material was part of a spate of such killings (reported by T. G. H. Strehlow; see Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 127). From then on, Gillen modified his own collecting practices, and attempted to modify those of his friends in Central Australia like Cowle, though the practice continued amongst less 'enlightened' Europeans. On occasion Gillen even arranged for sacred material to be returned. Cowle wrote to Spencer on 18 March 1899 (see Mulvaney, Petch, and Morphy 2000: 120–21):

A man called Price Maurice has been up round here lately and picked up some marvellous information from the blacks.... I was a bit annoyed because he was securing every Churinga stone he could get hold of and several places took stones that I had not interfered with, to please you and G. I fancy he colared my sugar ant stones.... You recollect I had these once and gave them back to them.

Further evidence of the return of, or refusal to misappropriate, sacred material comes from letters Gillen wrote to Spencer. See, for example, Gillen's letter of 6 May 1897 (Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch (eds) 1997: 162) and Spencer's own comments in *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (Spencer 1928: 839):

Years ago, during the Engwura of the Arunta [Arrernte] tribe, Gillen and myself had seen hundreds of Churinga used, but, though we could have had them, we refrained from doing so, because we realised what they meant to the natives; in fact we actually returned to them some that they gave us.

Spencer and Gillen clearly made a deliberate decision, early in their fieldwork careers, that the collection of material culture was not to be undertaken against the wishes of the Aboriginal people. As Spencer wrote in a letter to E. B. Tylor dated 28 April 1899 (quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 178): 'Gillen and myself have a certain number which were secured before we really knew what they meant or how sacred they were in the eyes of the natives. Since we knew this we have not interfered with the churinga.'

The privileged relationship Gillen had with the Arrernte, based on friendship and trust, meant that he continued to be shown sacred objects and to participate in rituals throughout his stay in Central Australia. As Morphy (1997: 49) has argued, however, while it would be quite wrong to suggest that Spencer and Gillen were fieldworkers who entirely transcended the attitudes and values of their time, 'compared with most of their contemporaries they showed much greater respect for Aboriginal culture and concern for Aboriginal rights and welfare'.

Sadly, however, Gillen's dedication to ethnography had profoundly negative implications for his career and family life. In 1896 he was asked to stand for the South Australian parliament but, despite his hankerings for a political life, turned down the opportunity in order to partner Spencer later that year at the Engwura. When later an offer came to transfer to Port Augusta as stipendiary magistrate on a substantial annual salary of £400, he also rejected it. When in 1899 he did decide to move, for family reasons, the only vacancy was at Moonta, a Cornish Wesleyan mining community on the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia on a much lower salary. He hated both the job and the town. From this point on he lived in South Australia and, like Spencer, had to travel to Central Australia to continue his fieldwork.

Spencer and Gillen's longest period of fieldwork together was in 1901–2, after which they published *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* in 1904. In 1901 they embarked on a journey from Adelaide, in South Australia, to the Gulf of Carpentaria. They were accompanied by two Aboriginal helpers and a police trooper, a friend from their Alice Springs days. They travelled in wagons the whole way, camping and sleeping outside every night. They spent weeks, occasionally months, in each place—staying in Charlotte Waters, Alice Springs, Barrow Creek, Tennant Creek, and Borrooloola—studying local Aboriginal groups and collecting ethnographic and zoological specimens. Both men kept journals, as well as field notebooks, and made photographic and cinematographic records and sound recordings. Gillen's diary, known as 'Camp Jottings', written so that his family could know what he had done, has since been published (Gillen 1968). This gives an easily assimilated version of events during their year's fieldwork. I will come back to its significance later, but here is an edited, for brevity's sake, extract from Gillen's diary for 3 April 1901, spent at Alknuturilirra, that gives an idea of what a 'typical' day for them was like (*ibid.*: 18–9):<sup>4</sup>

During the morning the Aboriginals performed a sacred rain dance...which is one of the ceremonial dances of the.... Rain-making ceremony. We succeeded in getting two [cine] records and a number of interesting photographs.... In return for a bag of flour and some tea, sugar and tobacco we obtained the 7 head sticks, beautifully decorated and used in the ceremony, these will be packed and sent through to Melbourne where all material collected by the Expedition is to be stored.... In the afternoon the Blacks performed...the sacred ceremony of the great snake of which we got [cine] and photographic records. The ceremony illustrates a native tradition relating to the...man of the Snake totem, who was in the Alcheringa [or Dreaming] robbed of his [woman] by a man...of the brown snake...totem.... The whole ceremony is a very fine one and will be fully described in our work later on. We find that our [cine] films

<sup>4</sup> The square brackets in the following quotation are reproduced from the published edition of *Gillen's Diary*.



are not long enough to take in a whole ceremony, they should be 300 feet instead of 150. In the evening we obtained four [sound recordings]... Collected some natural history specimens, specimens are scarce or our hunters are lazy for in this direction we are moving slowly. Today has been quite a field day for us and we have enjoyed it immensely...

The sound recordings and films made during the expedition are the earliest such field records in these forms from mainland Australia. In addition, a number of museums hold objects collected by them on this expedition. For example, the majority of the objects donated by Spencer and Gillen to the Pitt Rivers Museum were collected in 1901–2.

The notebooks and journals from this expedition in particular reveal the meticulous nature of their fieldwork and the extent to which they cross-checked information. They systematically wrote up their journals each evening and analysed the material as they went along, as the following passage from Spencer's *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928: 776) makes clear:

Once more, to my relief, there have been no ceremonies for three days, which has given us a chance of quiet talks with our chief informants... It takes also a good deal of time to sort out one's notes, because they are jotted down just as we see and hear things, and must be done over daily, while they are fresh in memory, so that they can be transcribed legibly, and also so that one can get hints as to further work.

It also seems clear from the records for this expedition that they recorded information that went against their original hypotheses and modified their interpretations to take account of the new material.

The third and final fieldwork Spencer and Gillen carried out together was in an area near Lake Eyre in South Australia for two weeks in August 1903. According to Spencer (in a letter to Frazer, dated 13 June 1903), this was 'a flying visit to the nearest tribe with a maternal descent—the Urabanna—just to see whether it really has intichiuma [increase ceremonies] and whether it believes in reincarnation' (quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 215). This visit was quick and 'dirty', their shortest, least 'professional' fieldwork, and amongst Aboriginal people with whom they had not worked in any detail before. It was to have dreadful consequences. When Mulvaney and Calaby were writing their biography of Spencer they heard from Mrs Luise Hercus, who had made a linguistic study in the area, that:

In 1970, a man, versed in Arabana (Urabunna) lore, recalled the visit by the two anthropologists. As he was then a youth of some fourteen years, the old men had sent him away beyond earshot, but he remembered the precise campsite and that they had spoken some Aranda [Arrernte]. More importantly, he recalled the misgivings of some of the elders. As Gillen's high reputation

preceded him, they were willing to discuss secret and sacred matters with him, but they were hesitant about disclosures to Spencer.... According to this very reliable informant, after Spencer and Gillen departed, disputes occurred between elders over these secret matters and reprisals resulted, involving...a 'lot' of deaths. (ibid.: 217)

It seems unlikely that Spencer and Gillen were ever aware of the dreadful consequences of their decision to check some facts arising from their earlier fieldwork. These tragic events are certainly not mentioned in any of their surviving letters, fieldwork journals, or publications. It is clear, however, that none of their other fieldwork periods had the same tragic consequences, as they would have been made aware of them, either by Aboriginal people or by the staff of the overland telegraph who would certainly have heard about it as they had heard earlier of the killings that resulted from the *tywerrenge* robberies.

#### *Field Materials and their Dissemination*

The material surviving from Spencer and Gillen's fieldwork comprises several different kinds. First, there are the narrative accounts by both men. In these, everyday activities are turned into stories for others to read. In the first (and, as far as the authors were concerned, only) instance, the intended readers were their families, who were of course separated from their fathers and husbands, many hundreds of miles away, out of daily contact for long periods of time. Because of this intended readership, these accounts contain little scientific detail. Rather they focus on amusing events, with short accounts of general, everyday activities and drawings of scenes of daily life. These drawings, especially those by Erlikialika (also known as Jim Kite), one of the Aboriginal assistants, in Gillen's field account, as well as those by Spencer himself in his journal, are charming in themselves, but they also provide much useful information about daily life otherwise missing from the field photographs. Both men wrote up their journals at the end of each day when what they had done was fresh in their minds.

Of more interest to an anthropological readership are the field notes. There are several forms of these, sometimes interspersed together in the same volume. The first kind are the notes written whilst an event is actually taking place. Spencer's journals held in the manuscript collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum more or less fit this description, as do Gillen's field journals, now in the State Library of South Australia in Adelaide. The second kind are the written-up notes, the first attempts to systematize the information and sort it out—leading eventually to the publications that followed the expeditions. The third kind are the vocabulary lists and notes on specific topics compiled by Gillen and sent to Spencer. These were Gillen's attempts to fill the gaps in their knowledge realised only after their

fieldwork was over (they almost always, therefore, relate to the period before 1899). They are usually more formally written up than the occasion-specific notes.

In addition to these sources, there is the less direct but relevant information contained in the letters that Spencer and Gillen wrote to colleagues and friends, both from the field and when they were preparing their publications. Those written from the field often contain additional information that did not find its way into the publications. Those written after fieldwork often demonstrate the process by which the publications were constructed. Further sources are the photographs, sound recordings, and cine films that they made during the 1901–2 expedition. These are primary sources of information for anthropologists and linguists working today, as well as for Aboriginal communities. Last, but by no means least, are the artefacts they collected, with the documentation attached to, or associated with, them.

I have seen all the documents listed in the appendix. An obvious question is whether there are any more field materials to be discovered? It seems highly unlikely that there are any more of Spencer's field notes to be located or identified, for he was a meticulous archiver of his own material. After his death, his daughters divided his papers between three institutions—the Pitt Rivers Museum, the National Museum of Victoria (now Museum Victoria), and the Mitchell Library, all of whose holdings I have researched. However, it is possible that there are some unlocated fieldnotes of Gillen's (from the Engwura or the short visit to The Peake) or further notes he sent to Spencer. Again, however, I think it unlikely, as there do not appear to be any obvious gaps in the sequence of known materials.

To date, the vast majority of the manuscript sources are only available in their original forms. There have been suggestions that each of them should be digitalized and/or transcribed and annotated in order that the materials Spencer and Gillen gathered in their fieldwork may be disseminated more widely. As may be seen from the appendix, this would be a massive task and, to date, little progress has been made.<sup>5</sup> In addition, publication of some of the data they collected would be problematic. Some of it, at least, should probably not be published for it deals with privileged or secret–sacred matters, that is, material that would traditionally only be available to certain sections of the Aboriginal community, for example, initiated men. From all the surviving documentation, such information appears to have been freely shared with Spencer and Gillen by their Aboriginal informants and friends. They were allowed to participate in secret ceremonies and to handle sacred objects. Spencer and Gillen themselves claimed this was because they were

<sup>5</sup> Since this essay was completed, the Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide has begun digitalizing the Gillen manuscripts held there. Most excitingly, they have also made available on-line his vocabulary lists, with current glosses. See <<http://www.library.adelaide.edu.au/ual/special/gillen.html>>.

accepted as initiated members of the Arrernte.<sup>6</sup> As they wrote (Spencer and Gillen 1904: xi):

Those who have worked amongst savages will realise that this enabled us to see things and to gain information of a kind quite inaccessible to the uninitiated worker, however observant he may be. As an instance of what this means, we may say that on one occasion, when coming into contact with a strange [i.e. previously unencountered] tribe, in a camp nearly two hundred miles away from our last halting-place, we were a little surprised to find that the natives knew all about us. They were not only quite friendly, but seemed anxious to help us. Later on we found out that the tribe amongst whom we had last been working had actually, unknown to us, sent on two men to tell the strangers that we were friends, and that they were to show and tell us everything without fear. It may also be advisable to point out that all of our information has been collected at first hand.

The importance attached to secret–sacred material by Aboriginal communities will already be clear from the earlier reference to the killings of informants at Lake Eyre. Aboriginal communities in Australia are very interested in historical information about them in museum and other archives, and it is now generally accepted that they should be consulted before any detailed research is carried out as well as before publication. Of course, on particular issues opinions can vary both within Aboriginal communities and within individual groups as to what course of action should be followed. Before any transcription project could be initiated, therefore, the views of the relevant Aboriginal authorities would have to be sought by the organizing body. For this reason I believe that any such project should be led by an Australian institution rather than by any European or American institution. The consultation period is likely to be lengthy and possibly contentious. Such consultations are now almost routine for most Australian museums and the relevant customs and practices are firmly established.

I would argue, however, that for a number of reasons it is important that those parts of their books and other materials that are not controversial should be disseminated more widely. First, today Spencer in particular is a problematic figure in Australian history and anthropology—largely because he is associated with cultural assimilation policies and such invidious practices as the removal of ‘half-caste’ children. (While many of these only occurred after his death, it has been argued that he was a strong proponent of such policies and that his advocacy led to

<sup>6</sup> They may perhaps have been ‘accepted’ as fully initiated because of the debt of friendship felt by the Arrernte to Gillen. However, Spencer and Gillen never claimed to have undergone the rites, including subincision, necessary to become fully initiated into male Arrernte society. I think that they meant to claim only that they were accepted as being of equivalent status to fully initiated men.

their development.) A proper examination of his work at its most unrefined level would enable his contribution to anthropology to be properly reassessed.

Secondly, for a long time Gillen was perceived as the junior and silent partner of the collaboration. For example, in their biography of Spencer, Mulvaney and Calaby present him in that light. I think that this belief has been at least partly addressed by such publications as *My Dear Spencer* (Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch (eds) 1997), but dissemination of their primary fieldwork materials would, I think, serve to raise his standing even further, for these make clear his attempts to obtain facts and confirm information and his close working relationships with his informants. I do not, however, think it is necessary to lower one man's reputation (Spencer's) in order to raise the other's (Gillen's)—as some appear to be doing (see, for example, Mason 1998–99). It is more useful to look at exactly how their collaboration worked and how the raw data they collected became the polished publications used by generations of anthropologists.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, many anthropologists and linguists working with the Arrernte today would be extremely interested in the raw data contained in Spencer and Gillen's fieldnotes. Because they attempted to obtain information systematically, the information they collected throws interesting historical light on many current debates. David Wilkins, with whom I worked on the glossary for *My Dear Spencer* (Wilkins and Petch 1997), is a linguist who works with the Arrernte. Before he started work on the glossary he had been using mainly *The Arunta*, the book written by Spencer alone after Gillen's death (Spencer and Gillen 1927).<sup>8</sup> This led Wilkins to have a fairly low opinion of Spencer and Gillen's linguistic work and abilities. Spencer had, it seems, refined the raw linguistic data with the benefit (or in this case, definite disbenefit) of hindsight and with the application of then-contemporary linguistic methodology. As Wilkins explained to me, however, when he was able to work with Gillen's letters he revised his opinion. Although it is clear that Gillen was not a fluent Arrernte speaker, and in many cases used the pidgin lingua franca current at the time (using the term *corroborree* for 'ceremony', for example), his vocabulary was quite large and his ear, though untrained, not bad. Indeed, it has often been possible for Wilkins to work out shifts in language and meaning from that time to this. I believe that much more work of a similar nature could be carried out if the raw data were made more widely available.

<sup>7</sup> See Jones 1999 for a useful discussion of these questions.

<sup>8</sup> *The Arunta* was published fifteen years after Gillen's death and was written by Spencer after a very short solo field trip to Alice Springs undertaken in 1926. See Sam D. Gill's *Storytracking* for further information about this field trip and about Charlie Cooper, Spencer's main informant at the time (Gill 1998: 15, 18–19, 98, 115). Gill suggests that many of the 'inaccuracies' of *The Arunta* (and earlier publications) are due to Spencer's conflation (or ignoring) of Gillen's fieldnotes.

Fourthly, wider dissemination would also make it possible to compare Spencer and Gillen's published and unpublished accounts of particular events. There have already been some attempts at such comparison; for example, by Sam Gill in *Storytracking* (1998) and by Phillip Jones (1999). In *Storytracking* Gill compared versions of a particular Arrernte story in a number of sources, setting the published accounts by Spencer and Gillen, principally in *The Arunta* (Spencer and Gillen 1927) alongside those in the unpublished journal entries by both Spencer (in his field journals for 1926, in Museum Victoria) and by Gillen (in his notes and journals in Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide written before 1898)—as well as alongside those in Géza Róheim's *The Riddle of the Sphinx or Human Origins* (Roheim 1934) and in Mircea Eliade's *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Eliade 1973). The extracts compared deal only with one story, in each account only taking up a dozen or so pages, although Gill's analysis takes up many more. This is a start, but until more material is made more widely available, it will be impossible for a full comparison of Spencer and Gillen's published and unpublished accounts to be carried out.

Moreover, once each of the accounts is placed side by side, day by day, and event by event, it will be possible to reconstruct a fairly full report for each part of their two main fieldwork periods. When brief comparisons have been made between the different accounts, it has been observed that Gillen's 'Camp Jottings', because of its narrative form, is the most easily assimilated account, providing a framework upon which the more detailed descriptions of the actual ethnographic events of any particular day may be hung. The field accounts are more fragmentary, as they were prepared for the author's eyes only and, like all anthropologist's field notes, rely a good deal on shorthand and sketches. In many instances, the rudimentary shorthand of the fieldnotes is only understandable when the texts of the two journals are available at the same time.

Bringing these separate versions together makes it clear that the two men worked independently but that their approaches were co-ordinated. Gillen gives much more detailed accounts of the particular ceremonies and uses many more Arrernte words. Spencer's accounts are more detailed about such matters as the physical relations between one person and another, for example, and the exact detailing of the sequence of events. It is clear, however, that the sum was greater than the parts and that neither Spencer nor Gillen could have produced the same quality of work without the other. Reading the different accounts makes one wonder why more anthropologists do not collaborate. Spencer and Gillen's collaboration allowed them to concentrate on different things, to ensure that as little as possible was missed, and then to collate the information. This collation presumably first took place around the campfire at the day's end, but was later incorporated into their more formal accounts. Collaboration also allowed them to use their own particular skills. From the little comparative work that has been done so far (see, for example, Jones 1999), it seems that Spencer was more detached from what was

happening, often describing people's roles in ceremonies by their functions rather than by their names, and coming to more dispassionate conclusions. Gillen, as one might expect from his letters, appears to have been more involved in the action, interacting more with the protagonists, and speaking more directly to individuals. Having said this, one needs to recognize that very often Spencer interacted on a one-to-one basis with Arrernte individuals and Gillen was very capable of being a calm and uninvolved observer.

In addition to the invaluable additional information that would be revealed to modern-day readers by such a collation of data, the methods by which their raw data was refined into the final publications, and the manner in which intellectual structure was imposed upon day-to-day confusion, becomes much clearer. Reading the raw data allows different views of the information to be formulated. There has long been controversy in Australia, and beyond, about the information contained in Spencer and Gillen's publications and how it differs from that provided by such other authors as Carl Strehlow and his son T. G. H. Strehlow. I am not sure how much raw data still survives from these latter authors but comparative consideration of this might be a further possible aim of any project (see Hill 2002).

A further objective that would be achieved by publication of the field data is that it would lay bare, at least for this partnership, the impact that their collaboration had upon their work. When an individual anthropologist works on his or her own, the initial thought processes are confined within his or her own head and may not be shared with colleagues either verbally or in written form. These thoughts are therefore lost to future examination and analysis. Because of the accident of physical separation (with Gillen in Central or South Australia and Spencer in Victoria for most of their partnership) and the limited communications technology that was available to them at that time, they were forced to collaborate in written form. Because Spencer was a careful archivist and his daughters passed the information on to museums and libraries (and Gillen and his descendants, to a lesser degree, likewise) this documentation has been passed down to us. Unusually, it allows us to examine the intellectual process from 'fact-gathering' to presentation in publications—it makes it clear and potentially subject to analysis. I cannot think of another anthropological partnership where the particular circumstances of physical separation and technological hindrance have led to such advantageous conditions for present research.

People have speculated how Spencer and Gillen actually carried out their fieldwork on a daily basis. For example, questioning whether they could speak directly to informants or only through interpreters. Analysis of the fieldwork materials would allow their methodology to be laid bare. From the preliminary work done to date it seems clear that both Spencer and Gillen did speak directly to informants at least some of the time, but that while ceremonies were being performed they mostly stood to one side and silently observed. They have also often been accused of interfering with a ceremony's natural flow or of engineering

events, but to date I have found little evidence that this was so. Gillen certainly facilitated the holding of large-scale ceremonial cycles by the provision of rations but this, if considered interference rather than facilitation, was only part of the wider invidious effects of 'white man's flour' upon Aboriginal society, an effect fully dealt with in Tim Rowse's *White Flour, White Power* (1998). In addition, it is clear that while Spencer and Gillen asked men to perform during the day 'rehearsals' of ceremonies that normally occurred at night, so they might photograph and film them, it is clear from their accounts that the actual ceremonies still took place at their allotted time. The most explicit description is probably that given by Spencer in his 'Note on Illustrations' in *The Arunta* (Spencer and Gillen 1927: xiii):

In some cases, such as those dealing with the Kurdaitcha man...and pointing-bones and sticks, they represent individuals who are decorated and arranged for the purpose of illustration. It would, of course, be absolutely impossible to secure photographs of the actual performance. It is easy to obtain photographs of the preparation for ordinary corroborees, because this work is carried on during daylight, but those illustrating the dances which take place at night are reproductions of photographs taken during daylight rehearsals that were held at our request, so that we might photograph them.... The great majority of illustrations representing ceremonies of various kinds are reproductions of instantaneous photographs, often taken under difficult conditions in regard to light and position but, in all cases, they represent the actual scene.

We always abstained very carefully from interfering in any way with the carrying out of ceremonies, just taking 'snapshots', as we best could, in order to secure a true record of the proceedings under their normal conditions.

The final reason why I think dissemination of this material is important is perhaps the obvious one. When Spencer and Gillen were working in Central Australia, most Aboriginal people did not have access to formal education and were not literate. Their acknowledged contribution to the anthropology of that time was limited to the provision of verbal information, which was then processed by Europeans into European formats. Because it is relatively easy to find copies of Spencer and Gillen's publications in public and academic libraries in Australia, many people have access to the refined data. I would suggest, however, that the raw data would be more meaningful and important to groups like the Arrernte. The mediation of the outsider is least in these formats (and most overt) so that the voices of individual Arrernte men, women, and children may still be heard in these accounts.



### Conclusion

I first became interested in Spencer and Gillen when I was employed from 1992 to 1994 to transcribe and research Gillen's letters for *My Dear Spencer*.<sup>9</sup> Since that publication was completed I have continued to be fascinated by the way in which their work continues to be central to understandings of Australian anthropology; many writers who have reflected upon the development of anthropology in general have considered the partnership's contribution in some detail (see, for example, Kuklick 1991, Stocking 1995). Moreover, although it is more than a hundred years since they began their fieldwork, their publications are still controversial. This controversy relates to many of the issues discussed in this article, including the methods by which they gathered their data, the type of information they were privy to, and the ways in which that information was used.

Although, along with Haddon, Spencer and Gillen were amongst the earliest exponents of recognizable anthropological fieldwork, their contribution was quickly eclipsed by Malinowski. Morphy (1997: 28) has suggested that

Spencer and Gillen must take some responsibility for the way in which their image has been diminished by posterity. They were conscious that initially they were not anthropologists; they both had a tendency to be too respectful of the talents and opinions of others and they remained loyal to an evolutionary theory that did little to inform the main contribution of their research.

However, Morphy recognizes that Spencer and Gillen had an essentially modern take on anthropology and fieldwork, demonstrated when they discussed in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 12) the way in which Aboriginal culture was changing:

It must, however, be understood that we have no definite proof to bring forward...of any fundamental change of custom. The only thing that we can say is that, after carefully watching the natives during the performance of their ceremonies and endeavouring as best we could to enter into their feelings, to think as they did, and to become for the time being one of themselves, we came to the conclusion that if one or two of the most powerful men settled upon the advisability of introducing some change...it would be quite possible for this to be agreed upon and carried out.

Measuring their fieldwork against Morphy's definition of it as entailing the monitoring of the life of the society from within, of being part of daily life, and getting to know in an extended way members of the community (Morphy 1997: 43), it is clear that Spencer and Gillen achieved much of this future paradigm. They also

<sup>9</sup> This work was funded by a grant from the British Academy, whose support is gratefully acknowledged again here.

met his summary of good fieldwork practice, 'leading questions were to be avoided, the data was to be meticulously cross-checked with different informants' (*ibid.*). In fact Morphy argues that Spencer and Gillen pioneered many of the techniques of modern fieldwork.

Spencer and Gillen's lives and work seem to me to be very relevant to Australian history and to the development of a sense of Australian identity. In a review of the recently published edition of Cowle and Byrne's letters to Spencer, the Australian historian Tom Griffiths commented: 'For a glimpse of life in Central Australia one hundred years ago...you could hardly do better than read this book...many of the concerns explored in these letters still resonate in our country today' (Griffiths: 2000). Much the same could be said of Gillen's letters to Spencer published in *My Dear Spencer* and of the other materials discussed in this essay. The full contribution Spencer and Gillen's legacy can make to that resonance, however, will only be appreciated when as much as possible of the vast range of field materials they bequeathed to us is freely available to the widest possible audience.

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APPENDIX. *The Current Locations of Spencer and Gillen's Fieldwork Materials*

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MUSEUM VICTORIA, MELBOURNE

The journals Spencer wrote for his children, 1901–2; field photographs, from 1894 to 1904; correspondence between Spencer and academic colleagues, including two letters from Gillen, 1894–1912; Spencer's field notebooks for the Horn Expedition, 1896–97, for the 1901–2 expedition, for the short visit to Old Peake; the 'official account' of the 1901–2 expedition; sound recordings (original recordings on wax cylinders, as well as versions on cassette and CD) and cine films (with video copies) from the 1901–2 expedition.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM, ADELAIDE

Gillen's field photographs (from before 1894 to 1912) and one of Gillen's field journals, for 1901–2.

STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE

Gillen's field journals for 1901–2 (except for one in the South Australian Museum); the original version and the first transcription of 'Camp Jottings'; and three vocabulary lists etc., from before 1894 to 1899.

BARR SMITH LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Five volumes of Gillen's copies of the letters he wrote to Spencer between 1894 and 1899, along with his Engwura fieldnotes and an Arrernte vocabulary list.

MITCHELL LIBRARY, STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY

The journals written by Spencer for his children and a second and more complete copy of the journals held at the Museum Victoria (see above).

PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Spencer's field notebooks from the Engwura expedition of 1896; his field notebooks from 1901–2; the letters written by Gillen to Spencer between 1894 and 1904; and correspondence between Spencer and colleagues relevant to fieldwork from 1894 to 1929.

SCREENSOUND AUSTRALIA (NATIONAL SCREEN AND SOUND ARCHIVE)

Copies of the sound recordings and cine film from the 1901–2 expedition.

NATIONAL SOUND ARCHIVE, BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON

Copies of the sound recordings from the 1901–2 expedition.

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