
Although he mapped, measured and drew, as he did in his old life, he did not treat the knowledge as divisible and saleable as he did with parcels of land. Here, he was a true convert. A wholly different set of principles divided the old life from the new.

That the rise of anthropology went hand in hand with the expansion of British Empire is now a well-worn story, albeit one that risks much misinterpretation in the telling. The legacy of this complex power—knowledge nexus, and the connections it stimulated between policy making, governmental actions and scholarly knowledge production still makes its mark across the research and teaching programs of many university departments to the present. Yet the more intimate tales through which we might garner something of this history are to be found in the life stories of those who were drawn to research and write about non-European peoples. A small but growing body of biographical work on the Australian scene draws out some elements of the energy, enmity, politics and sheer hard work that animated individuals and networks and led to the assembling of what we know today as the classical anthropology of Aboriginal Australia. In honing his historian’s eye on the marginal but significant figure of R.H. Mathews, Martin Thomas has added an absorbing further perspective to this scene.

There are a number of reasons why Thomas’ telling of Mathews’ story makes for compelling reading. One is the period through which Mathews lived and worked—traversing the mid-late 1800s, from the demise of ‘armchair’ scholarship that saw the customs and practices of other peoples assembled for a readership out of so many shreds and patches of accounts by local churchmen, police, pastoralists and travellers, to just short of the rise of a professionalised social scientific discipline in the early twentieth century. Martin Thomas presents us with Mathews the boundary-crosser, a man who necessarily carried with him many of the assumptions of his times, yet who rejected its prevailing evolutionary paradigm. A central and intriguing element of the story concerns the politics and professional allegiances that ensured Mathews’ work would be marginalised, if not rendered invisible—a campaign led by the most celebrated anthropologist of his era, Sir Baldwin Spencer.

The deeply held enmity between Spencer and Mathews and those whose support each was able to mobilise (in Spencer’s case no lesser figure than Sir James Frazer, author of the celebrated *The Golden Bough*) might appear on the face of it to be an ugly turf war, fuelled by differences in class and ego. Thomas reveals there to be more going on here than an original Sydney—Melbourne rivalry. Early in the book Thomas makes much of two contrasting passages from the writings of Baldwin Spencer and R.H. Mathews. The first is a short description Spencer penned on the physical transformation of an Aboriginal woman as she moved from youth to old age, her body marked by the ‘drudgery of food-collecting and child-bearing’, developing by age thirty ‘into what can only be called an old and wrinkled hag’. The second is Mathews’ description of women’s practice of making necklaces from the ‘red-coral’ feelers of the Murray lobster, which ‘form a pleasant contrast to the ebony coloured necks and shoulders of the wearers’. Some readers will protest that such a contrast turns upon a highly selective reading of Spencer’s corpus, a reading that is contradicted by some deeply humanised photographs he produced of Aboriginal women, at the very least. Nevertheless, Thomas makes a convincing argument for reading the contrast in these descriptions as standing for the ‘great chasm’ between the attitudes of Spencer and Mathews. These attitudes are apparent and clash at a number of levels—most importantly for the story being told here, in theoretical approaches to writing of Aboriginal customs and practices (one was committed to the evolutionary thinking of the day, one refuted it) and in their manner of engagement with and regard for Aboriginal persons. What the two men and their contemporaries shared was a belief that Aboriginal people were a dying race and that anthropology’s task was to produce as substantial a record of their ways of life as possible, before they were gone. A great diversity of approaches were made under this broad project. Of all the anthropologists of his era Thomas suggests Mathews is of interest to us because his ‘empathy with his subjects sings loudest’. As a conduit for grappling with a particular time in Australian history, Mathews is an engaging figure as he embodies the central ideas of one epoch, but simultaneously anticipates the next. At one level this is a book about the ways public attitudes are distilled in the minds of individual persons, but also of how seamlessly a mind might engage contradictory attitudes.

Swirling at the heart of the book is a series of personal and professional controversies of dramatic proportions. The first of these is the ‘mother of all scandals’ that precipitates Mathews’ father, mother and their infant children leaving a prosperous life in rural New South Wales, where they pursued work as manual labourers and domestic servants. This fall from grace followed a series of tax dodges (unremarkable for the time and business in which they were engaged) and more dramatically the involvement of Mathews’ father and his three brothers in at least one murder of a tax official. Mathews’ parents would never recover from the trauma and shame of these events. Remarkably, they managed to keep this dark family secret from their offspring. The uncovering of this story is one of the great achievements of Thomas’ meticulous historiographic labours. R.H. Mathews would grow up in ignorance of the causes of his father’s emotional and physical ill health, the reasons for his withdrawal from social intercourse, and his tendency to react violently in disputes with neighbours (on one occasion he was reported to the police for assault). A self-inflicted isolation from the neighbouring community was pivotal...
to a young R.H. finding some of his earliest playmates among local Aboriginal children.

Mathews came to his calling in anthropology—his ‘ethnomania’ as Thomas dubs his newfound zealotry—for a highly profitable career as a surveyor and sometime Justice of the Peace, presiding over local and police courts. In this transition we find the paradox that situates Mathews’ story so compellingly as a metaphoric touchstone for the era. While he would never have understood his situation thus, as a surveyor Mathews had been engaged in the technical work required to legally dispossess Aboriginal people of their land. He made his fortune fulfilling government and private contracts in the 1870s, the ‘golden years of surveying’, as land tenure was formalised under the Torrens system of land registration. While his vocation made Mathews a participant in the extinguishment of what we now know as native title, it also brought him into contact with Aboriginal people and some of their most highly valued places. So encountering a cave with mesmerising rock art including a massive drawing of the creation figure Baimai in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales is cited as a trigger for his change in life direction. Having made enough money by the age of fifty to scale back his surveying work, Mathews immersed himself first in the recording of rock art and by turns in a holistic pursuit of Aboriginal culture. His conversion calls to mind the recent work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who writes of the radical distinction between cartography and wayfaring as different ways of journeying and of ordering relationships of people to environments.

A torrent of published papers followed. These Mathews was aggressively determined to circulate as widely as possible. This eagerness for recognition and perhaps a lack of social grace led to some crucial errors of judgement. He criticised A.W. Howitt’s work as riddled with errors to Howitt’s close friend Spencer. Incidents of a kind of self-plagiarising, or the ‘duplication controversy’ as Thomas terms it, provided fuel to those men who were looking to discredit Mathews’ rapidly growing body of work. The powerful trio of Spencer, Howitt and Fison banded together in agreement never to cite Mathews’ papers and recommended others do the same.

The more substantial disagreements between these men lie in their differing interpretations of Aboriginal practices and worldviews. For Howitt, who took his data from secondary sources, Aboriginal religion centred around a supreme being who lived in the sky. Mathews, by virtue of the work he had done with Aboriginal guides, saw Aboriginal cosmology as spatially grounded. He recorded the thoroughly place-based practices of Baimai as he went on his world-making journey, accompanied by his near relative (not son, as Howitt would have it) Dhuurramulan. They also disagreed vigorously on their interpretation of Aboriginal marriage laws. Mathews’ wholesale rejection of Howitt’s principle of exogamy is recognised by Thomas as an extreme position on a subject requiring subtlety. He was driven to such rash responses by the toxic politics that pervaded the scene. Yet for all of this feeding and outlandish claim, Thomas insists it is Mathews’ work that prevails in the present; his ethnography is more humanistic, more culturally relativist, lacking the ethnocentric and evolutionary tones of his rivals. Rather than a kind of slavish commitment to savage customs, Mathews read Aboriginal ritual in terms of a process of ‘inculcation of civic and spiritual values’. In the mid-twentieth century authorities A.P. Elkin and W.E.H. Stanner were in agreement as to the exemplary nature of his work; the former had made some headway on a book about Mathews by the time of his death. Despite these stark differences there is no sense of Mathews having put forward an explicit theoretical model in opposition to the work of his contemporaries. His anti-evolutionism lay more at the level of commonsense than critique. His ideas emerge gently and implicitly through description, through the endeavours of a self-described ‘quiet worker’. Mathews remains for his biographer a ‘slippery fish’, difficult to get hold of, emotionally austere, by no means a political agitator on behalf of Aboriginal interests. A limited archive has both challenged Thomas and given him license to roam widely, conjuring his contexts for presenting Mathews to us from both before and after Mathews’ time. So we learn of his ornithologist son Gregory’s similar obsession that resulted in the twelve volumes of *The Birds of Australia*, before we learn much of Mathews himself. We follow the work of his granddaughter-in-law, sound recordist Janet Mathews, through the small townships of New South Wales. The final chapter is given over to the endeavours of Jimmie Barker, a Muruwari man who was too young to have known Mathews, but who toiled at recording his people’s language, culture and the intimate and devastating episodes of their colonial history. Barker’s archive owes much to his collaboration in later life with Janet. By the end of the book Mathews’ life can be glimpsed in fragments through a mortal coil, his work comprising but one significant and engaging chapter in a grand project that never loses its urgency or appeal—to record cultural knowledge before it is lost.