MR STREHLOW’S FILMS

Libby Tudball

Strehlow in his middle years. Photo courtesy of Strehlow Research Centre
**Introduction**

*Mr Strehlow’s Films* is a documentary about the life and work of the late Professor T.G.H. Strehlow (1908-1978). The film uses an episodic style to tell the story of Strehlow’s life. He was born and raised at Hermannsburg Mission, where his German father, Carl, and mother, Frieda, were Lutheran missionaries. *Mr Strehlow’s Films* provides glimpses of his close relationships with the Arrernte people at the mission, his family life, his education in Adelaide, and his return to Central Australia for research into Aboriginal language and traditions, and later as the first Patrol Officer for the Commonwealth Government reporting on the welfare of Aboriginal people.

T.G.H. Strehlow became Australia’s most controversial anthropologist and linguist, meticulously documenting many facets of Central Australian Aboriginal life. Over a period of forty years he produced a massive body of manuscript, film, sound and still photographic work of Aboriginal (largely Arrernte) ceremonial performance – an archive unparalleled in this country and the world. The film tracks the challenges posed by the tasks Strehlow set for himself as ethnographer and film-maker; the controversies surrounding the Strehlow Collection; and the contemporary work underway to return aspects of this material to the appropriate communities in Central Australia.

**Curriculum Links**

*Mr Strehlow’s Films* will have interest and relevance for students of Indigenous Studies, Australian History, Studies of Society and Environment, Media Studies and Cultural Studies from middle to senior secondary school, and at the tertiary level.

**The Setting and Opening Sequences of Mr Strehlow’s Films**

At the start of the film, these words appear on the screen:

*The producers seek to treat Indigenous cultures and beliefs with respect, and have consulted widely in the production of this programme. No secret sacred sound or photographic material has been used in this programme. To many Aboriginal communities it is disrespectful and offensive to depict persons who have died. The following programme contains such scenes and we apologise to any community members who may be offended.*

- Why would the film-makers have begun the film in this way?
- What do these words tell you about the film-makers’ views on the use and importance of the Strehlow Collection and their attitudes to Indigenous Australians?

Early in the film, we see these words: ‘The Past is vanishing; soon I shall be a stranger in the land that bore me’ (T.G.H. Strehlow, *Diary, Book 1*, 1932).

- What do you think Strehlow meant by these words?
- How do the film-makers depict Central Australia in the opening sequences of the film? What images and sound effects are used?
- The voice-over tells us that the setting is the ‘hot, remote, valley of the Finke River’. How is the river depicted?
• What technique is used to separate the various segments of the film?

• What effect do you think is created by the use of both black and white and colour at various stages of the film?

T.G.H. Strehlow’s Life
(Source: Strehlow Research Centre: http://www.nt.gov.au/strehlow/strehlow.htm)

T.G.H. Strehlow was born in the heart of the Western Arrernte country in the Northern Territory of Australia. Strehlow’s playmates and friends were Arrernte children, and he learned much about their traditional Indigenous lifestyle and language. He also had a strict European education, which introduced him to German literature, Greek, Roman and European classics. Until he was ten years old, Theodor played constantly with the local children, but later, the cultural gaps widened, as the Indigenous children prepared for Initiation or marriage.

• What do we learn about Theodor’s early life in the film?

• How do we know that Arrernte women felt a special connection to Theodor?

• Do some further research on his early life by reading extracts from ‘Journey to Horseshoe Bend’: http://www.nt.gov.au/strehlow/day1.shtml

In 1932, after graduating with an Honours Degree in English Literature and Classics from Adelaide University, Strehlow returned to the land of his birth to study the Arrernte language and culture. He said:

_The fact is, that although I speak the language, I scarcely know anything about the traditions of the people with whom I grew up, and whose respect and trust I need to be able to do what I might make my life’s work. I want to learn all I can from the old men. They’re the ones with secrets locked in their brains._

• How significant do you think Strehlow’s childhood experiences may have been in his desire to learn more about the Arrernte people?

In 1933, some Arrernte elders, including Gura (Tjenterama), the last of the great ceremonial chiefs, asked Strehlow to record sacred rituals and accept associated artifacts from a site near Alice Springs. The men were concerned that when they died, their knowledge would die with them. Strehlow was asked to accept responsibility for the preservation of sacred activities. News of Strehlow’s commitment spread rapidly among the Arrernte, and he was soon asked to record the ceremonies associated with other sites. With the knowledge being entrusted to him, Strehlow was able to begin his systematic recording of the religious beliefs, social systems and history of the Central Australian language groups. Even in 1933, there were groups where all the fully trained elders had died, and the only source of information was from the old men who had acted as ceremonial assistants. (source: http://www.cinemedia.com.au/FOD/1996/spockley554.html)

At an early age, Strehlow became aware of the great changes occurring in Arrernte society, and of the mistreatment of Aboriginal people by some sections of the non-Aboriginal society. His concerns and actions, primarily as the Patrol Officer for the Central Australia District (1936-42), generated criticism and ridicule in some sections of society, but a great respect among the Aboriginal people of the area, who trusted him in his role as Aboriginal Welfare Officer.

• Do some library research to find out what the government policies were on the treatment and rights of Aboriginal Australians in the 1930s and ’40s.

• Why did policy makers of the time believe that Aboriginal people should live on ‘Reserves’ and ‘Protectorates’?

• Why would Strehlow have been ridiculed and criticized for his beliefs at the time?
• In a class discussion, talk about the ways in which policies and attitudes to Indigenous Australians have changed. In your discussion, clarify the difference between policies of assimilation and self-determination for Indigenous peoples.

Soon after his marriage in 1935 Strehlow traveled across Central Australia with his wife Bertha in a very happy period of his life. (His marriage to Bertha ended in 1968. They had three children.) After serving in the army during World War II, Strehlow renewed his contacts with Aboriginal elders. Between 1946 and 1974 he made numerous lengthy visits to Central Australia to continue his studies.

• What evidence does Strehlow’s films provide of the happiness of those times?

Strehlow gained considerable recognition for the work his father had begun, and his academic stature grew with the publication of *Aranda Traditions* (1947). This work had been written in 1934, but Strehlow delayed publication until all his informants were dead. In 1971, he published a monumental work, *Songs of Central Australia*.

T.G.H. Strehlow was an outspoken critic of white mistreatment of Aboriginal Australians. He maintained that white Australians could learn a lot from the moral and social structure of Aboriginal society. Strehlow’s career and his role as custodian of Aboriginal secrets has been dogged by controversy. Today, there is widespread acknowledgement of many aspects of Strehlow’s work, but his genealogical work, which is very important to Arrernte people, is less well known.

• Why is it important for some groups of Indigenous Australians to have evidence of their heritage and links in an area?

In 1978, Justice Michael Kirby was invited to be the keynote speaker at the launch of the Strehlow Research Foundation. Kirby remembers that Strehlow was keen for the symbolism of the front cover of the programme to be recognized.

• What was Strehlow’s message?

• Strehlow died tragically in the midst of his conversation with Kirby. Why was he so distressed?

The End of Strehlow’s Life
Theodor George Henry Strehlow died in 1978 at the age of seventy. He was cremated and his ashes spread under a Desert Oak tree on the Finke River, one and half miles from Hermannsburg. This was where he was raised and wished to return after death.

‘Journey to Horseshoe Bend’
Note: The full story may be read on the Strehlow Research Centre web site: http://www.nt.gov.au/strehlow/publications.htm

‘Journey to Horseshoe Bend’ is the story of the ill-fated thirteen day journey in 1922 that ended in Carl Strehlow’s death. It provides rich descriptions of the life of the time on the stations and in the social groups of Central Australia. In *Mr Strehlow’s Films*, parts of the journey are re-enacted.

Theodor’s father, Carl, had become very sick with a disease called ‘dropsy’. It was decided that he should be taken by horse
and buggy to the train at Oodnadatta, and then to Adelaide for further treatment. T.G.H. Strehlow was only fourteen when he set out on the journey with his seriously ill father and his mother, Frieda. The other people with them were the schoolteacher, Heinrich, and Arrernte friends, Hesekiel, Jakobus and Titus. They set off on Tuesday 10 October 1922, but only got as far as Horseshoe Bend on the Finke River before Carl died.

- What insights into the story does the film provide?

- How do we know that it was a gruelling experience for them all, but particularly for Carl?

- Estimate how long the journey would have been.

- What are the effects of dropsy?

- Why did some of the Aboriginal women from the mission travel the first stages of the journey with the party?

The journey was a sad experience because of the loss of Carl; but it was also an experience which taught Theo a great deal about the importance of the land and its deep spiritual symbolism for Aboriginal people. Theo had been away from the mission only once before – to Germany when he was just two years old. The journey to Horseshoe Bend and beyond was his first real awakening to white society.

- Read extracts from the first day of ‘Journey to Horseshoe Bend’, which provides insights into Theo’s experiences and visit the web site for a full description of the preparations for the journey: http://www.nt.gov.au/strehlow/day1.shtm1.

**Tuesday, 10 October 1922**

*The last morning at Hermannsburg arrived ... few of the dark folk waiting in the camp north-west of the solid whitewashed station buildings have slept much during the previous night ... the whole dark population was sick with grief for their one and only teacher and leader. And then ... a public announcement had at last been made ... that their ingakta was now so weak, that he would have to seek medical aid in Adelaide. ... both the buggy and the van would have to be got ready for the three hundred and eighty mile journey south to the railhead in Oodnadatta.*

- Why didn’t the party choose to go to Alice Springs?

- Carl Strehlow was known by the Arrernte locals as *ingkata*, meaning ceremonial chief, or *auju*, meaning old man of importance. What do these names tell you about the attitude of the people to the missionary?

- Find evidence of how difficult the preparations of the track were for the ‘dark’ men.

T.G.H. Strehlow’s Day One entry tells us Carl had been at the Hermannsburg Mission for twenty-eight years, and during this time, he had organized the construction of the church, school and other buildings to form a village.

- In the Day One entries, find out why the local people were so fond of Carl and why they respected his leadership so greatly.
What were his attitudes to Arrernte traditions?

What happened to Carl Strehlow during World War I?

Read about Carl Strehlow’s departure from Hermannsburg. Why was there such an outpouring of grief?

What happened to the mission when he left?

There are thirteen entries in the book of the ‘Journey’ covering each of the thirteen days. As a class activity, divide into groups to read each extract. Report back to other members of the class your discoveries about the Strehlow family, life in central Australia and the journey.

October 20, 1922, Day 11

On this day, Carl Strehlow died.

... An ominous, leaden Friday dawned after an oppressively hot night. It had been a night when the thermometer had not fallen below ninety degrees; a night when sleepers had tossed off all blankets and spent most of the snail-paced hours perspiring lightly even when lying on top of their bed sheets ... a night in which sleepers had tossed, turned, complained, groaned, sworn, and cursed loudly, debilitated by almost intolerable and completely enervating discomfort.

Why do you think T.G.H. Strehlow went into such a detailed description of the night?

Who do you think he was referring to in his descriptions?

... By two o’clock in the afternoon the thermometer was registering a hundred and ten degrees in the shade of the verandah, and the galvanised iron sheets of the hotel roof crackled loudly as the curved flutes pressed and strained against their holding screws, expanded to the fullest extent by the merciless blaze from above. All outdoor work had stopped long before midday.

... In the stifling heat of his room, Strehlow was groaning with racking pains in his chest. Huge liquid beads, which he was too weak to wipe off, kept on emerging on his forehead, his face, his neck, and his chest ... These physical sufferings were matched by the intensity of the other battle which was going on in his mind. No prayers were bringing him relief from the torments of his body.

How would you describe the language Strehlow uses to set the scene for this day?

Why do you think Theo would have included this interpretation of what his father was going through in the ‘Journey’ book?

... Theo was told the news of his father’s death while he was sitting with his friends in the Aboriginal camp. It had been relayed by the half-caste kitchen women by shouts and sign language, and had been received in the camp with loud cries of grief. The women immediately began their customary wailing for the dead man who had long since become accepted as an Aranda father figure ... Theo had run to the hotel when he heard the news ... he reacted with outward calmness: and when he was left alone with his mother, he tried to reassure her as much as any teenage boy would.
• How do you think a teenage boy would react to this news?

• Do you think Theo would have been shocked by the reaction of the Aboriginal women?

October 22 1922, Day 13

This is the last entry on the Journey. The extract tells about Jakobus’ farewell to Mrs Strehlow and Theo, before they continued their journey south after the death of Carl. Jakobus was one of the Indigenous men from the mission.

... He came up slowly leading his horse by the bridle. ... his few short words were vibrant with emotion and unaffected in their sincerity. First he shook Mrs Strehlow warmly by the hand and assured her that neither he nor the rest of the Hermannsburg folk would ever forget their dead ingkata. Then he turned to Theo and appealed to him never to forget his own homeland and his own Aranda folk. 'Your father now rests with us, here in the land of the Aranda people, and you too must return to us and to your home of Ntarea after you have finished your schooling. Always remember us as we shall remember you – don’t leave your own folk forever'.

... Then [Jakobus] turned, mounted his horse, and rode slowly to the yard to round up the loose donkeys. The empty easy chair ... was a poignant reminder of Strehlow’s death journey. ... [Theo shaded] his eyes with his right hand. He kept looking after the buggy till it had vanished form his sight in the distant box gum flats. A strong emotional reaction now began to set in his mind; for the departing vehicle reminded him of the sudden and tragic end of the journey that had been undertaken with such great faith and courage to save his father’s life.

• What do Jakobus’ words and actions reveal about his respect and love for the Strehlow family?

• Why was the departure of the buggy such an emotional moment for Theo?

• In the sections of the October 22 ‘Journey’ entry (see the web site), Theo expresses his concerns about entering white society, and his journey ahead. Find out why he was so troubled.

• What do these passages tell you about the extent to which T.G.H. Strehlow regarded himself as being connected to Indigenous identity?

English Activities

• How would you describe T.G.H. Strehlow’s writing style?

• Is it similar to or different from the styles of contemporary writers?
freedom, traditional ways, heritage and identity.

- What impression does Mr Strehlow’s Films give of life on Hermannsburg Mission?

- Why are there still controversies about the rights and wrongs of the establishment and work of missionaries?

- After doing further reading of extracts from ‘Journey to Horseshoe Bend’, what views do you think Carl and T.G.H. Strehlow had about the Arrernte people’s spirituality?

**The Strehlow Collection**
- What different points of view could be put either for or against the work of Strehlow in collecting sacred artifacts and filming secret ceremonies?

**Custody to the Highest Bidder**
In 1999, items from the Strehlow Collection were put up for sale at an auction room in Adelaide, but shortly before the auction, one third of the items was withdrawn from sale. Many of the items were described as ‘Aboriginal crown jewels’. Philip Jones, from the Museum of South Australia, commented that if Arrernte people had been amongst the all white audience, they would have been deeply disturbed by the process. Others have even described the auction as ‘sacrilege’.

- Who would have put the items up for auction?
- Why do you think they decided to withdraw certain items?
- How can you explain Jones’ views?
- Who might describe the auction as sacrilege and why?
- What do you think should happen to the Strehlow Collection?

**The Scientific Expeditions**
Mr Strehlow’s Films shows the scientific expeditions made by anthropologists from the University of Adelaide in the 1930s. These included geographical studies and physical studies of Aboriginal people from areas where there had been only minimal white contact. Many scholars of the time believed that Aboriginal people were threatened because so many had died. They assumed they had the right to study the Aboriginal people as a living, endangered race. T.G.H. Strehlow also completed studies at this time that included filming, taping of songs and further collections of artifacts. He was actually encouraged in his work by many Indigenous groups.

- Describe the kinds of studies depicted in the film.
- What do you think is meant by the term ‘salvage anthropology’, used in the film to describe the studies?
- Why would some scholars today argue that the studies were inappropriate?
- The film refers to ‘passive objects’ studies, and claims that Aboriginal people cooperated with the studies. Does this mean that the studies were therefore morally right? Discuss this issue in class.

- What kinds of studies did T.G.H. Strehlow perform in the 1930s?
- Why was it impossible for him to view his work critically?
- What are the controversial aspects of Strehlow’s work?
- What constraints should there be on who should be able to see and use Strehlow’s archival film footage?

Aboriginal communities have many special ceremonies and rituals that are called ‘secret men’s business’. In the view of Indigenous peoples, these rituals should not be seen by men who have not been through special Aboriginal initiation ceremonies. However, Arrernte men did allow Strehlow to film many of these rituals.

- In your view, should these film segments still be reserved for initiated men only?
- Who really should decide the answer to this question?

**The Stern/People Controversy**
In July 1978, photos by T.G.H. Strehlow were printed in Stern magazine showing sacred sites and secret rites of Indigenous groups. Strehlow was very upset when the photos were then sold to People magazine. Stern magazine subsequently published a statement saying that
Strehlow was not responsible for the publication, and People apologised for the publication. The whole controversy about whether the photos should or should not have been published caused Strehlow a great deal of moral anguish.

Strehlow said that he had every right to permit use of the photos because the old men in the photos had passed away. Opinions were divided about whether Strehlow was guilty or not in releasing the photos to the magazines.

From what you have learned in working through the study guide and watching the film, do you think the Strehlow Collection photos should be freely published in magazines. Why or why not?

The Strehlow Collection is divided into two broad categories, OPEN and RESTRICTED. The open category contains material which has been examined and the decision made that it contains nothing that will offend Aboriginal sensitivities or malign living reputations. The restricted category is further divided into ‘private’ or ‘secret/sacred’ and consists of ‘men’s only’ material. The Sensitive Issues Committee makes decisions on research access to these categories on a case by case basis.

What does the Strehlow Collection include?

- 1,200 men’s sacred ceremonial objects (tjurunga) and their documentation (which includes 4,500 Aboriginal song verses and their stories)
- twenty-six hours (or sixteen kilometres) of 16mm movie film of over eight hundred ceremonial acts
- 150 hours of sound recordings of stories and songs
- 8,000 still photographs and colour slides of scenes, ceremonies and Aboriginal people (including Carl Strehlow’s early Hermannsburg images)
- forty-four Field Diaries, five Office Diaries, three ‘London’ Diaries and nine personal diaries
- 150 genealogies (family trees)
- Aboriginal site maps
- Professor Strehlow’s professional and personal correspondence (approximately 10,000 letters)
- newspapers and cuttings
- German manuscript material (including 6,000 letters, Carl Strehlow’s handwritten drafts of his publications and wordlists, German news cuttings, and Carl and Freida’s notebooks)

Why does the Collection need a highly secure and climate controlled environment?

What evidence did you see in the film of the attempts by the Centre to liaise with Aboriginal community members?

Why is it important for this Collection to be so carefully protected and managed?


Imagine that you are writing a newspaper report or the script for a TV or radio presentation about
the opening of the Strehlow Research Centre. Either as individual work, in pairs, or in small groups, develop your report and comment on the significance of the Collection. Present the reports to other members of the class. Discuss the different key points you raise about the significance of the Strehlow Collection.

In the segment of Mr Strehlow’s Films entitled, ‘One Hundred and Fifty Miles in Three Days’, we see Hesekial’s relatives visit the Centre to hear a tape recording of his voice from 1960, now held at the Strehlow Research Centre.

• Why would this be such a moving experience for Hesekial’s grandson and other relatives?

• What was Hesekial’s role in the journey to Horseshoe Bend?

• Was his quest successful?

• Why might other members of the Indigenous community wish to visit the Centre to view films or other aspects of the Strehlow Collection?

**Further Activities**
The Strehlow Research Centre publishes papers and books about T.G.H. Strehlow. Students can begin their further inquiries from the web site.

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Aboriginal elder Doug Abbott at the site of the police station ruins at Illamurta Springs, near the Finke River. Photo courtesy Adrian Herring.

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