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Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia

Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) was a British/Australian biologist and anthropologist, best known for his work amongst the indigenous Aboriginal tribes of Australia. After graduating from Exeter College, Oxford in 1884 Spencer was elected a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford in 1886 before being appointed the Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne. In 1911 Spencer was appointed Special Commissioner for Aborigines and undertook fieldwork in the Northern Territories between 1911–1912. This volume, first published in 1914, is the result of his fieldwork. Spencer describes in detail the social customs, kinship structures, marriage ceremonies and religious beliefs of thirteen tribes he encountered in the Northern Territories. Spencer also compares differences and similarities in the religious and social structures of different tribes and includes copious illustrations of religious and political monuments. This volume was the first ethnography of these tribes and provides valuable insights into these societies.

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NATIVE TRIBES
OF THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY
OF
AUSTRALIA

BY

BALDWIN SPENCER

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Professor of Biology in the University of Melbourne;

Special Commissioner for Aborigines in the Northern Territory

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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TO THE MEMORY

OF MY FRIEND

FRANK J. GILLEN

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PREFACE

IN 1911 the Commonwealth Government sent a small scientific commission to the Northern Territory to make a preliminary survey of the country. The party consisted of Dr. J. A. Gilruth, Dr. Anton Breiul, Dr. W. G. Woolnough, and myself. The time at our disposal was short and the work that we did was naturally, more or less, of an introductory nature, indicating lines of research that might be followed up, with advantage, in the future.

Towards the end of the same year I was asked by the late Mr. Batchelor, then Minister for External Affairs, to return to the Territory for a period of twelve months as Special Commissioner for Aboriginals and Chief Protector in charge of the Department that the Government had instituted to safeguard the interests of the aboriginal population.

The Council of the University granted me the necessary leave of absence, and accordingly I left Melbourne on December 25th, 1911, and Darwin, again, on December 25th, 1912.

A very considerable part of my time was occupied in routine work, and, unfortunately, owing to an accident which, temporarily, rendered me unable to walk, I lost two months of valuable time during the dry season. I was, however, able to do some work amongst tribes, with regard

to the customs, organisation, and beliefs of which little has been known hitherto. The present volume contains the scientific results of my work, expanding and, in some points, correcting my preliminary report, which it supersedes.¹

In 1911, in company with Dr. Gilruth, now Administrator of the Territory, I had visited Melville Island, where, thanks to the assistance of Mr. R. J. Cooper, who has lived amongst the natives for long, knows them, and is entirely trusted by them, we were able to see and learn something of their customs. These were so interesting that I was very anxious to be able to spend more time amongst them and gladly availed myself of the offer of Mr. Cooper to assist me in gaining some further knowledge of these interesting people. I went across to Melville and Bathurst Islands in March, 1912, and spent six weeks there, during which time I was fortunate enough to see one of their most important ceremonies, connected with the initiation of the young men. It was the monsoonal period and we had a decidedly wet time, but it was intensely interesting, and I am deeply indebted to Mr. Cooper for his help, without which I could have done but little amongst these natives. It is not too much to say that it is due to him that white men can now land, with impunity, on Melville and Bathurst Islands.

At a later period, in December, 1912, I revisited Bathurst Island, in company with Mr. P. Cahill, and had the opportunity of again witnessing the weird, wild burial and

¹ A short preliminary account was published in the "Bulletin of the Northern Territory," No. 2, April, 1912. In May, 1913, I presented to the Commonwealth Government a further "Preliminary Report on the Aboriginals of the Northern Territory," containing recommendations concerning the general policy to be pursued in regard to them. This was also published in the "Report of the Administrator for the year 1912," issued in October, 1913.

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mourning ceremonies of the natives and of obtaining both cinematograph and phonograph records of them.

A motor trip during the months of August and September, in company with Dr. Gilruth, who had meanwhile been appointed Administrator of the Territory, enabled me to see something of the conditions under which the natives were living in a wide area of the country, extending as far southwards from Darwin as Newcastle Waters, and as far east as the Gulf of Carpentaria. Our trip was, of necessity, too hurried to enable me to do any serious work amongst the natives, but, as we were in contact with tribes, either identical with, or very closely similar in regard to their customs, organisation, and beliefs, to others, such as the Mara, Mungarai, Binbinga, and Anula, which had previously been investigated by Mr. Gillen and myself, this was not a matter of great importance and I was glad of the opportunity that the trip afforded me of taking a general survey of the country and aboriginals.

It is only possible to study the latter seriously when camped amongst them quietly for some time. I was, fortunately, able to do this in the case of the Kakadu Tribe, in connection with which my most interesting results were obtained. I secured these only in consequence of the whole-hearted co-operation of Mr. P. Cahill in my work, during the time that I spent as the guest of himself and Mrs. Cahill in their delightful home at Oenpelli, far out in the wilds on the East Alligator River. Mr. Cahill has had long experience of the Kakadu and other tribes, talks their language, and has won their complete confidence. He most generously placed his time and knowledge at my disposal and, thanks to him, I was able to gain considerable insight into the sacred beliefs of the Kakadu people. I am also much indebted to him for most valuable assistance at

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a subsequent time, when we travelled together to the Flora River and came into contact with natives of the Mudburra and Waduman tribes, for the opportunity of meeting whom I am largely indebted to my friends Mr. and Mrs. Pearce, of Willeroo Station.

Amongst all the tribes, I have found it of very great advantage to be able to show them that I am well acquainted with the customs and secret matters of other tribes. As soon as they understand this, it is wonderful how they open up, and it is, also, equally remarkable how completely they close in the presence of anyone who is uncongenial to them.

It is perhaps advisable to say once more that both the late Mr. Gillen and myself were regarded as fully initiated members of the Arunta tribe, which is now, unfortunately, decimated in numbers and hopelessly degenerate in customs.

In conclusion, I have to express my thanks to the many other friends who have helped me in various ways. To the Administrator of the Northern Territory and Mrs. Gilruth I am deeply indebted for their most generous assistance and personal help in ways too numerous to mention. To the Hon. J. Thomas, Minister for External Affairs, during the period that I spent in the Territory, I am indebted for cordial interest and assistance in my work, as also to Atlee Hunt, Esq., Secretary for External Affairs. In travelling over the Territory I met, as everyone always does, with the greatest kindness and courtesy at the hands of the few scattered station holders and the officials on the Telegraph line.

Lastly, I wish to thank my publishers for the very courteous and generous way in which they have acceded to what, I fear, must have appeared my rather extravagant desires in regard to the publication, and more especially the illustration of this and previous works. These

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illustrations, however, better than many pages of description, will serve to give an idea of the stage of culture and manner of life of a primitive and fast-disappearing race.

It is with deep regret that I am unable to associate with my own, as co-author of this work, the name of F. J. Gillen, to whom, because of his untiring, enthusiastic, and sympathetic study of the natives, whom he knew and understood, every student of Australian anthropology, and myself most of all, owes a great debt of gratitude and admiration.

MELBOURNE,

February, 1914.

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NOTE

I AM indebted to the courtesy of the Hon. the Minister for External Affairs for permission to use Figs. 4, 7, 11, and 12, and to Dr. Anton Breiul for Fig. 18A. The remaining Figures of scenery and ceremonies are all reproduced from my own negatives. I am very much indebted to Mr. R. H. Walcott, curator of the Ethnological Museum, Melbourne, for the great amount of trouble that he has taken in the preparation of the photographs illustrating the chapters dealing with Weapons, Implements, and Decorative Art. All the specimens figured in this work are in the National Museum, Melbourne.

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