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REVIEW

I'D RATHER DIG POTATOES. CLAMOR SCHURMANN AND THE
ABORIGINES OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1838 - 1853.
EDWIN A. SCHURMANN

Reviewed by Phil Fitzpatrick

Although Clamor Schurmann only spent two continuous years in Adelaide, the
extent and detail of his publications and records have made him a major source
for anyone interested in the Kaurna during the first critical years of European
settlement in South Australia. A facsimile edition of his 1840 Kaurna vocabulary,
which he wrote in conjunction with Christian Teichelmann, is still available in
Adelaide but one must be prepared to search amongst the phrases and notes
before the wealth of anthropological and other information contained therein can
be uncovered. A similar situation exists with I'd Rather Dig Potatoes, the title
of which is a reference to Schurmann's views on gold prospecting.

A great many fascinating people crossed Schurmann's path while he was in
Adelaide but for the most part the reader only gets a fleeting glance as they are
mentioned in relation to whatever issue or problem is concerning him at the time.
Teichelmann particularly gets short shift, probably because he was as dominating
a personality as Schurmann himself and a degree of competition existed between
them. Kavel, Moorhouse, both Angas', the eccentric geologist Menge, Stevenson
and the various Governors and many Aboriginal people, including such notables
as King John, Rodney, Captain Jack and Little Jimmy, all get passing mention
with only the occasional extra detail. So too are the fleeting and intriguing
glimpses of the "Native Location", Piltawodli, and the embryonic town of
Adelaide.

Schurmann's diaries and letters were written between 1838 and 1853. Ted
Schurmann, Clamor's great grandson, found them in the South Australian
Archives microfilm collection, where they had languished for many years because no-one was able to translate them from the archaic German script in which they were written. Ted was fortunate to meet Hans Spoerl, who had learnt the script as a young student in Switzerland and was willing to translate the 500 or so exercise and note book pages. Ted Schurmann provided complete copies of the translated manuscript material to the South Australian Museum and the Aboriginal Heritage Branch where they may be examined, with Ted's permission, by researchers and students.

The diaries and letters have been cobbled together with no apologies for the "patchy" feeling the variable detail creates. Ted Schurmann's editorial presence is deliberately subdued but crucially informative where it occurs; he prefers to let his great grandfather speak for himself. A reading of the original translation reveals that nearly everything of significance has been included and, even with the frustrating gaps, there is no detraction from the considerable contribution which the book makes towards our knowledge of the Kaurna and Port Lincoln tribes. Teichelmann published two works on the Kaurna; a detailed phraseology and vocabulary of the language, in collaboration with Schurmann, and a brief account of the habits and customs of the Aborigines. It is believed that other unpublished material of Teichelmann's, as well as diaries etc, were taken to South Africa by Governor Grey. Attempts are now being made to ascertain the present whereabouts of this material. Additional data recorded by Teichelmann would perhaps fill in some of the gaps in Schurmann's record and thus be a valuable addition to our understanding of the Kaurna.

When Clamor Schurmann and Christian Teichelmann arrived as missionaries in Adelaide in 1838 the general view of Australian Aborigines was that they were particularly ignorant savages especially lacking in spirituality. Fortunately Teichelmann and Schurmann took their instruction from the Dresden Mission Society to translate the Bible into the Aborigines' language seriously. As soon as they arrived in the new colony they began to learn the Kaurna language, even though Governor Gawler, who had travelled out with them, hinted that it might be easier to teach the Aborigines English instead. As he grew more proficient in the language Schurmann searched for some kind of spiritual framework through which he could teach the Kaurna Christianity. Not surprisingly his interest sparked a chord among the Kaurna and some of the men began to pass on to him
traditionally secret information, possibly as a sort of exchange. Schurmann eagerly accepted this and began to draw parallels with Christian concepts, much to the fascination of the Kaurna.

Although his motives for delving into Kaurna spirituality were far from anthropological, Schurmann's observations, in that sense, are now some of his most valuable. Unfortunately, as is the nature of diaries and letters, they are also very fragmentary. This is probably also because, unlike modern anthropologists, he had no foreknowledge of the concepts of creation which exist amongst Aboriginal people. Schurmann, for instance, makes reference to the Kaurna belief that the constellation Pleiades is a group of girls digging for roots. At the same time he also makes reference to Orion as a group of youths hunting emus. We know from anthropological research that the Pleiades feature prominently in the Seven Sisters mythology, a myth cycle that spans most of northern and western South Australia, and can reasonably assume that Schurmann was being told about part of this myth. But is there a connection with the youths and Orion? Is this a hitherto unknown southern element in the Seven Sisters Dreaming? We will probably never know.

In his quest for a way to describe the concept of a supreme being to the Kaurna, Schurmann came across the word munana, which he initially thought was a proper noun and a suitable substitute for Jehovah, which the Kaurna had trouble pronouncing. As it turned out the word came from Kaurna ceremonial language and roughly equates to the Western Desert term tjukurpa or the cruder English term "Dreamtime". Although Schurmann found the creation myth which the Kaurna man Wattlewatpenna (Encounter Bay Bob) described to him at this time as "wonderful", there is no hint that he understood the broader concept. It is interesting how Ted Schurmann offers no comment on this aspect and one wonders how much he also understands about the significance of this type of information in Schurmann's diaries and letters.

Although Schurmann was only in his early twenties during the two years he spent in Adelaide, the depth to which he must have engendered trust amongst the Kaurna can be measured by the way he, almost unknowingly, tapped into this traditional secret knowledge. It is, nevertheless, difficult to tell what he really thought about Aboriginal spirituality. After many years amongst the Nauo and
Pangkala people around Port Lincoln, during which he recorded in detail the various male initiation cycles up to the Wilyaru, he was still able to publish the opinion that their mythologies were "monstrous and in every respect [of a] ridiculous character". Then again, he was a missionary and it would have been difficult to admit to the veracity of the beliefs of the people he hoped to convert.

There is no doubt, however, about Schurmann's respect and empathy with the Kaurna. He travelled, camped, ate and often slept in their shelters during his two years in Adelaide and his diaries are sprinkled with the names of his Aboriginal "friends". He thought they were:

mentally endowed by their Creator with the same capabilities as the finest races on the face of the Earth, but morally sunk into a bottomless pit of wickedness of heart and pervertedness of judgement.

He modified the last part of this view later on in Port Lincoln, saying the Aboriginal people had their own "codes of ethics and laws" which were "different" to those of the Europeans.

Despite this Schurmann was frustrated by what he saw as the Kaurna's perversions and wickedness. He noted, as have many other early observers of indigenous peoples, that the bickering and fighting was more subdued amongst "scrub natives" and he deduced that the Kaurna were influenced by the poor example of the whites in Adelaide. Much of the fighting resulted from traditional mortuary rite "inquests" and revenge killings and this was not helped by the fact that introduced diseases, such as syphilis, were creating more and more deaths and more and more "inquests". He was also particularly grieved at the Kaurna's nonchalant attitude to infanticide.

The bad influence of many of the whites, both mentally and physically, on the Aborigines was of great concern to Schurmann and was accentuated after his experiences in Port Lincoln, particularly after he witnessed at first hand the savage punitive measures taken by the police there. He wrote to subsequent governors pointing out that:

one will never achieve a conversion of natives without a continuing instruction in words and deeds and this can be made possible only in a settlement of their own.

Much of his time in Port Lincoln was taken up in fruitlessly campaigning for land for Aborigines away from the influence of Europeans. He was constantly fobbed
off by the government, however, and had few white friends who supported him.

In 1840 Schurmann had hoped to move from Adelaide to Encounter Bay but that was to be reserved for his good friend H. A. E. Meyer. Instead, at Governor Gawler's insistence, he was sent to Port Lincoln as Deputy Protector. He returned intermittently to Adelaide over the following years to interpret at trials and he spent almost a year there after Little Jemmy's (Ngarbi's) trial and hanging in 1843, recording his good friend's last words; "by and by I will be a white man" - reflecting the Kaurna belief that the Europeans were the ghosts of their own ancestors, and a salient reminder to Schurmann that his preaching had either not really penetrated very deeply or, alternatively, Christianity had merely been taken on board by the Kaurna as an additional element in their own already rich spiritual life rather than replacing it. I suspect that Schurmann would not have objected too strongly to this use of his teachings. During this stay in Adelaide Schurmann made the final revisions to his book on the Pangkala language and supervised its publication.

In 1846 he left Port Lincoln to farm at Encounter Bay near the property of his good friend Matthew Moorhouse. It was here he met and married Wilhelmina (Minna) Maschmedt. He had little contact with the Aborigines during this time. In 1848 he was offered the job of Aboriginal Interpreter back in Port Lincoln and after he took the offer up he also succeeded in opening a school for Aboriginal children which was eventually absorbed into Archdeacon Hale's Poonindie Training Institution. In 1851 he spent a few days with Teichelmann at Morphett Vale. He left Port Lincoln for the last time in 1853 to take up a post as pastor to a new Lutheran settlement at Portland in Victoria. He died, aged nearly 80 years old, whilst attending a church conference at Bethany in the Barossa Valley in 1893.

Ted Schurmann's book leaves one with a sense of Clamor Schurmann as a compassionate and selfless man caught up in a crucial period of South Australia's history, battling against impossible odds to save both the souls and bodies of his Aboriginal "friends". The irascibility of the Kaurna, which is still discernible in their descendants, shines through the book admirably. So too does the brutality which was perpetrated against them and the other tribes in South Australia, despite the popular lie to the contrary. The book is highly recommended for its
fascinating picture of early Adelaide and particularly for its very personal view of the Aboriginal people who lived here at the time. Ted Schurmann has done everyone, particularly the Kaurna's descendants, a great service by publishing his great-grandfather's diaries and letters.
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