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## Sensing belief systems: review of Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession by Barry Hill

### **Abstract**

#### Extract:

Broken Song which is ostensibly about the anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow and his translation of the spiritual songs of the aboriginal people of central Australia. At the end of the book, one has some insight into the importance of these songs to the Aborigines and their belief system, but along the way we have an exciting examination of Strehlow's human motivations: growing up trilingual, parental influence, ethnicity, Lutheranism, Australian identity, racism, aboriginal politics, academic jealousies, the pitfalls of translation, personal passions, adultery, possessiveness, and even his involvement with an unsolved child murder case.

### **Keywords**

anthropology, Aboriginal Australia, Anglo-Australian society

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## **Sensing Belief Systems:**

Review of *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* by Barry Hill (Sydney, Knopf, 2002, xvii plus 818 pages, ISBN 1740510658, also published in paperback, Melbourne, Random House Australia, 2003, ISBN 1740512294)

*by Michael Platzer*

To stand amongst the great totem poles of the Coastal First Nations in Vancouver's incredible Museum of Anthropology is a spiritual experience. I felt I was in a cathedral of powerful beliefs. Although I had no understanding of the symbols carved into these shaven trees, I realized there was 'heavy stuff' associated with the giant statues. As a Roman Catholic raised with plenty of religious imagery, I have often regretted not being able to get into the heads of Buddhists, Hindus, African animists, native Americans, or aboriginal peoples. And although I pride myself on being multi-lingual, well-travelled, liberal, and open to other cultures, perhaps I am not clever enough and can only think only in two or three dimensions. Certainly, after meeting someone like the prize-winning Australian author Barry Hill, who can successfully mix poetry, biography, history, spirituality, psychology, political analysis, and contemporary judgments in one book, I feel particularly small and limited.

I have just finished his magnum opus (818 pages) *Broken Song* which is ostensibly about the anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow and his translation of the spiritual songs of the aboriginal people of central Australia. At the end of the book, one has some insight into the importance of these songs to the Aborigines and their belief system, but along the way we have an exciting examination of Strehlow's human motivations: growing up trilingual, parental influence, ethnicity, Lutheranism, Australian identity, racism, aboriginal politics, academic jealousies, the pitfalls of translation, personal passions, adultery, possessiveness, and even his involvement with an unsolved child murder case. What could have been a dry treatise becomes a vivid story of the son of German missionaries growing up among Aborigine children, trying to establish himself in Anglo-Australian society, believing he was doing God's work and something good for the native Australians, but finally being accused of betraying tribal beliefs and the sacred items put into his trust. Without his translation and conservation efforts, many Aranda songs and artefacts might have been lost to the world. Strehlow compared these songs to Homer's *Odyssey* and argued that the Aranda oral traditions should be considered as world literature. For this, Australia's only fluent native interpreter was branded a Nazi in the Australian parliament, mocked by colleagues, and never received the recognition he felt he deserved during his lifetime.

One wonders how much of Strehlow is in Barry Hill. Barry also lived for a while among a different 'tribe' (the 'Poms') and seems ill at ease with the current political climate in Australia. While an enthusiastic promoter of his native Queenscliff in Victoria (about which he has written a guide book), Barry nevertheless seems more at home in the great wide world and in conversations ranging from art to labour history. I have met few people who can move so quickly from abstract concepts to political details. His book about his father's participation in Australia's longest labour sit down contains personal recollections, a thorough economic analysis, the letters of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian labour leader to his beloved from prison, a political critique of Australia's leaders, interspersed with an unfinished fictionalized version of the incident. And it works - although one does have to keep at least five strains of thought going at the same time.

We need more people who can make accessible the multi-level experiences, beliefs, and actions of North American and antipodean indigenous peoples. The debates about multiculturalism must go beyond mere tolerance and provide us with some insights into the belief and value systems of the different peoples of

the world. While some behaviours may be condemned as being against what are now generally accepted universal standards, other beliefs and customs are best understood first before being judged, as in the injunction, well-known in North America, to seek to walk in another person's moccasins.

The struggle to gain appreciation of how other people think is never-ending.

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