Germans

Travellers, Settlers and Their Descendants in South Australia

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Edited by Peter Monteath

WAKEFIELD PRESS

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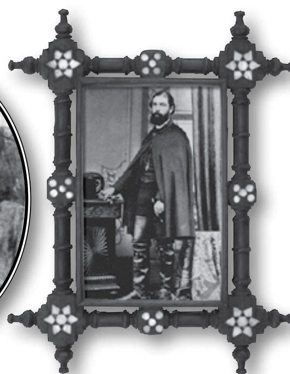

edited by Peter Monteath

Wakefield
Press

Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2011

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Cover design by Liz Nicholson, designBITE
Typeset by Wakefield Press
Printed and bound by Hyde Park Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title:	Germans: travellers, settlers and their descendants in South Australia / edited by Peter Monteath.
ISBN:	978 1 86254 911 1 (pbk.).
Subjects:	Germans – South Australia – History. South Australia – History.
Other Authors/ Contributors:	Monteath, Peter, 1961– .
Dewey Number:	994.2300431

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Acknowledgements

For some years there have been signs of a renewed interest in South Australia's Germans. One of the driving forces behind that revival has been Lee Kersten, who in 2005, and then again in 2010, organised conferences at the University of Adelaide devoted to the multiple contributions of Germans to the history of this state and of Australia more broadly. For many of the authors gathered here, those conferences both triggered an engagement with the topic and also provided an invaluable opportunity to air their knowledge and their ideas. Similarly, a workshop devoted to German pioneer women in South Australia, organised by a group around Pauline Payne and Lois Zweck and held in History Week 2010, was a catalyst for a good deal of thinking and writing on things German. On that occasion too, the generous provision of space and facilities by Ray Choate and his team at the Barr Smith Library was invaluable. Without these promptings, and without the communal exchange of ideas that such forums provide, this collection would not have come to fruition.

Without funding, too, this book might not have moved beyond the phase of a mere germ of an idea. Essential injections of publication support have been most gratefully received from History SA, from the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Flinders University, and from the University of Adelaide.

The efforts made by Penelope Curtin and Michael Deves at Wakefield Press in converting a variety of documents and images into a handsome volume fell nowhere short of the heroic. As for my fellow contributors, both in Australia and in Germany, let me thank them for their dedication to the project, for their generosity in sharing their profound and wide-ranging knowledge, and above all for their patience.

Peter Monteath
Adelaide, January 2011

Introduction

Peter Monteath

> One thing really troubled me in Australia, and more so here in Adelaide than in Sydney – because there was more cause for concern here – and that was the disunity of my countrymen. It is true it should have been no surprise, it was unfortunately by no means an unusual phenomenon, and I would have been taken aback if it had been any different, but nonetheless it does hurt me to recognize that a great and a most malevolent curse appears to weigh upon our poor nation. A scattiness is cultivated not just at home in our own nest but has been transported with anxious care into distant parts of the world, where it grows like weeds in fertile foreign soil. In North America the very devil is among them, in Chile they hoe into each other, just as they do in California. All of that was simply confirmed here, and the only place thus far where I have found my German countrymen really unified was in Tahiti – where there lived just one of them, and the arrival of another will make a fool of me.[1]

These are the words of the irrepressible Friedrich Gerstäcker, who knew a thing or two about Germans. He was one, he grew up among them in Hamburg, and then, as he toured the globe, he observed them in many of its corners. The young colony of South Australia, too, was on his expansive itinerary. He managed to fit it in after visits to California, various Pacific islands and Sydney, followed by a paddle down the Murray and a trek of over 1000 kilometres to Adelaide, which he was to describe as the wildest and most dangerous of his life.[2]

His recollections of Adelaide remind us of a feature of South Australia's Germans which we all too readily forget, and that is their sheer variety. True, there were the pious Lutherans who settled in

the Barossa Valley and other parts of the colony, religious refugees from their native Prussia. But in truth Germans made their way to South Australia from other German lands as well, at different times, and for many different reasons. They were farming folk from villages scattered across many parts of Europe, but they came from towns and cities too. Many stayed, but others were simply passing through. Their contributions were overwhelmingly positive, and they encompass both a breadth and a depth not easily fathomed.

South Australia can boast German connections which reached to the very pinnacle of politics and society on the other side of the world. Britain's reigning monarch at the time of the colony's foundation, King William IV, had a consort who went by the name of Queen Adelaide. By birth she was German royalty, hailing from the duchy of Saxe–Meiningen and christened with the regally prolix name Adelheid Amalie Luise Therese Carolin. In its corrupted form she was to give the first of those names to a place far removed from her German home, but which nonetheless was to bear the stamp of German influence long after Adelheid and the duchy of Saxe-Meiningen were no more.

The ascent of Queen Victoria to the British throne did nothing to weaken these lofty links with German Europe. For more than two decades through the middle of the nineteenth century, and during a crucial phase in the development of South Australia, the monarch was married to another German consort, this time in the person of her handsome cousin Prince Albert. The Prince had been born in the same year as Victoria, and, as coincidence would have it, with the help of the same midwife. Although the Queen's choice of consort provoked initial misgivings in some quarters, Albert came to be a valued and admired member of the British royal family. Victoria's grief at his premature death in 1861 was shared widely through the realm. When her son Alfred visited South Australia in 1869, both rural and urban Germans vied with one another to outdo the British in demonstrating their loyalty to the British prince.

Powerful German links were formed among more modest folk as well. Religious refugees of German peasant stock played an invaluable role in populating the infant colony of South Australia with a rural workforce. Through their trademark toil on the land they helped provide the colony with the food it so desperately

needed. In time they more than repaid the gift of religious freedom with their industry and tractability during the colony's tenuous formative years, and far beyond. In many regards they were the model human building blocks for the new colony.

These South Australian connections with Germany, high and low, are deeply inscribed in South Australians' historical consciousness; indeed they remain visible to this day in a multitude of forms, from the streetscapes of Hahndorf and the Barossa townships, the architecture of Adelaide, the foods and wines we consume, to the names of streets, towns and people. In Adelaide and beyond, a German heritage is omnipresent. What purpose, then, should be served with a new collection of essays on the contributions of Germans to this part of the world?

There are at least a couple of answers to this. The dogged persistence of the story of the devout and stolid German farmers doing more than their share to establish the colony of course has a foundation in reality, but there is quite a dose of myth as well. As Gerstäcker well knew, there is much more to be said about so many other Germans who made their way to the Antipodes, settlers and travellers from quite different backgrounds and driven by a multitude of reasons. Secondly, since the age of Adelaide and Victoria there has been more than another century of German migration, settlement and activity. For Germans, and indeed for others, there are parts of the often vexed history of Germans in South Australia's twentieth century they might prefer to forget. With the onset of a new century, however, the time has arrived to look at it closely and honestly, without ignoring obvious sensitivities, but with a commitment nonetheless to telling that age's stories truthfully.

* * *

From the perspective of almost any point of time in the past 100 years, the nineteenth century British admiration and respect for many things German is difficult to comprehend. Yet in the 1800s it was palpable. Even during the decades before 1871, when there was still no such thing as a unified German state, there was much to approve and no shortage of Britons prepared to say so. Having played their role in ridding Europe of the tyrant Napoleon

Bonaparte, Germans had excelled in music, philosophy, literature, and indeed in virtually every branch of the sciences. In the largest and most powerful of the German states, Prussia, a series of reforms had created an apparatus of state and a military organisation which was the envy of the rest of the world. Moreover, the Prussians, still mindful of the ignominious years of French subjugation, introduced systems of education and training widely held to be the best anywhere, with many passing through Prussia's exemplary institutions taking their skills and knowledge to the rest of the world. As for those who stayed behind, unification presented them with the opportunity to contribute to the emergence of Germany as a major global power, its rise observed with liberal quantities of esteem, respect and, as the *fin de siècle* drew near, some trepidation as well.

The first sizeable group of Germans to settle in South Australia had no inkling of how a future Prussian chancellor's *Realpolitik* would shape their homelands. In their day Germany was at best a cultural nation, a community with a shared sense of historical and linguistic identity, but no more than that. To the state of Prussia they felt little loyalty, since the king had imposed an unwanted liturgy upon them, and they had been deprived of their citizenship on receiving their hard-won emigration permits. For these rural folk from the eastern provinces of Brandenburg, Pomerania, Posen and Silesia, the primary allegiance was to a higher realm, to the worship of their Lord. When secular authorities interfered with that allegiance, they were prepared to cut their ties with the state and depart in search of the religious freedom that the South Australian colony offered.

Yet these first immigrants, united in their reasons for leaving their homelands, were by no means a homogeneous mass whose collective genes somehow shaped their identity and that of all who followed. Even on matters of religion the first fault lines soon appeared – as early as 1846 the Old Lutherans, not so many years earlier united in their opposition to an imposed liturgy they could not accept split into two separate groups, one led by Pastor August Kavel and the other by Pastor Gotthard Daniel Fritzsche. It was a division among the Lutherans which, in numerous permutations and varying degrees of rancour, persisted into the 1960s. In time

came Catholics and, albeit in much smaller numbers, Jews.

Not all were farmers. As Lois Zweck points out in a fascinating case study of the dynamics of early migration, there were numerous craftsmen and tradesmen, including butchers. Miners, too, came in significant numbers in the late 1840s and early 1850s, many of them from the Harz Mountains. Despite the persistence of the myth, not all Germans came to escape religious persecution, especially when persecution gradually gave way to tolerance after the death of Frederick William III in 1840. Increasingly, the Germans came as what we might call in today's parlance – with its troubling pejorative undertone – 'economic refugees'. And while it is true that for the first decade or so about half of the Germans came in closed congregational groups, that changed from around the middle of the century, even as family or group migrations continued. For the remainder of the 1800s there were German immigrants who continued to make their way out to the rural communities, but more and more chose life in Adelaide, where eventually they gathered in sufficiently large numbers to support, for a time at least, the existence of not just one but two German clubs. One of those clubs, patronised by Germans of the upper middle class, was housed in opulent circumstances in Pirie Street, and promoted German language and culture, while the other, the so-called South Australian General German Club (*Süd-Australischer Allgemeiner Deutscher Verein*) catered for a membership drawn largely from the working classes and garnered something of a reputation for itself as a hotbed of socialist radicalism.

The variety among the Germans in South Australia of course becomes especially evident when one looks beyond the main groups of immigrants to individuals. A fascinating early example is that of a traveller rather than an immigrant, namely Dr Hermann Koeler. As Koeler's title alone suggests, he was a man of education, whose medical training had served to secure him the role of ship's doctor, but whose intellectual curiosity embraced a world of knowledge far beyond his chosen vocation. Both the scope of his inquisitiveness and the range of knowledge exhibited by the doctor anticipate those qualities in so many Germans who followed in his wake and elected to stay much longer.

Foremost among Koeler's interests, as Peter Mühlhäusler

shows in his chapter, were the indigenous people Koeler encountered, on whom he cast the untrained yet observant eye of the lay anthropologist. Koeler's interest was replicated among many Germans, with the result that it is a recurrent theme in this collection. Though their impulse was quite different from that of Koeler, the German missionaries, too, displayed a keen interest in understanding the new colony's original inhabitants. Whether of Lutheran training and persuasion, like those discussed by Christine Lockwood and Mary-Anne Gale, or the Moravians investigated by Bill Edwards, the unrelenting efforts to comprehend the indigenous people and their culture are a remarkable constant in German missionary work in South Australia. The missionaries' efforts were not always rewarded – at least not in this world – and from today's perspective the extent to which they stemmed from unquestioned assumptions about the benefits of European civilisation can be disturbing. Yet for the sincerity of their commitment to their calling, for the high cost to their own physical and mental health, and for the untiring labour they invested in understanding the languages and customs of people so profoundly different from themselves, the missionaries claim a special place in the history of the colony.

The painter Alexander Schramm provides another instance of German interest in indigenous people and their culture, as Janice Lally and I suggest in our contribution. As with so many of the German immigrants, we can only speculate about what drove him to embark on a voyage to the Antipodes, yet we have some cause to be grateful that he did. The few paintings and other works by Schramm available to us in public collections provide an invaluable record of the presence of indigenous people alongside German and other settlers in South Australia. Where British artists tended to ignore the presence of the Kaurna and others, or at best to present them as exotic or picturesque embellishments, Schramm shows a distinctive empathy and an attention to detail.

Other Germans followed in Schramm's footsteps. The botanists Richard Schomburgk and Carl Wilhelmi and the policeman-cum-photographer Paul Foelsche all turned their hands at various points to amateur ethnography. But perhaps the most remarkable of all was not one of the settlers but rather the traveller Erhard Eylmann, the subject of the chapter by his biographer Wilfried

Schröder. Eylmann's travels through South Australia and its Northern Territory left a remarkably rich ethnographic legacy. While in many regards Eylmann's observations reveal serious gaps in his understanding of indigenous Australia, the dedication with which he pursued his work, and the multiple privations he endured in performing it, are quite astonishing. His understanding of ethnography might not have been without its deficiencies, but his capacity to gather and interpret evidence is sophisticated. Eylmann had after all received a German scientific training, and it stood him in good stead as he struggled to make sense of the complex human and natural world he confronted in South Australia.

Not only in Eylmann's case are the blessings of a German scientific education evident, as Philip Jones illustrates. His discussion highlights the incalculable advantages to the colony of an array of German-trained scientists, who for various reasons left their homelands behind them and brought their very considerable talents to bear when they got here, commonly with, at best, modest support. Though he stayed in South Australia just five years, Ferdinand von Mueller established a trend which others soon joined. Among them was the little-known figure of Marianne Kreusler, one of the naturalists who found a home at Buchsfelde near Gawler, from where she performed work which garnered international praise. On North Terrace, too, the German scientists made their presence felt, not least in the Museum and in the Botanic Garden.

The latter's debt to Richard Schomburgk – himself one of the Buchsfelde naturalists – is enormous, as one of his descendants, Pauline Payne, records. Like so many other Germans who rose to pre-eminence in their chosen fields – Alexander Schramm, Carl Muecke, Carl Linger, Marianne Kreusler, Otto Schomburgk – Richard Schomburgk arrived in Adelaide on *Princess Louise* in 1849. This was a cohort whose fundamental life experiences had been urban rather than rural, and whose political worldview had been in many cases coloured by both the hopes they had invested in the liberal revolutions of 1848–49 and by the disillusionment which followed the restoration of a conservative order. The 'Forty-Eighters', as they are sometimes called, brought with them an intellectual energy and cosmopolitanism which bestowed huge benefits on what was still a tiny and precarious colony.

Few figures illustrate the cosmopolitanism of mid-century Adelaide better than those who populate Michael Bollen's essay on the German Hospital that never quite came about. On one level it is a story of failure, since the long-debated hospital in the end took at most just one patient. On another, however, it is a noteworthy success story of German integration, of the easy relations that characterised Anglo-German Adelaide, personified in the larger than life characters of the mercurial Dr Bayer and the ebullient Osmond Gilles – the latter technically not German, but a merchant of Hamburg for 17 years and, like many of his day, a fluent speaker of both German and English.

Horst Lücke delves into the sometimes controversial achievements of Ulrich Hübbe in the realm of the law. While all South Australians have heard of the benefits of the Torrens Title system, few have an appreciation of the benefits it brought this and other parts of the world or of the role a somewhat enigmatic German played in introducing it to South Australia.

* * *

At the corner of North Terrace stands a monument commemorating the involvement of South Australians in the Boer War; one of the names inscribed on it is a certain Captain Samuel Grau Hübbe, the son of Ulrich. The very presence of that name hints at how successfully Germans had integrated themselves into South Australia; they had been hugely successful in finding a place in the colony, adopting its language and customs, marrying into its society and achieving prominence. Within a generation another Hübbe – Hermann Fritz, the son of Samuel – was added to the list of Australia's dead in the Great War. What more convincing evidence could be offered of the German settlers' devotion to Australia and the British Empire than the offering of the ultimate sacrifice in distant lands?

Yet the North Terrace monument possesses a Janus quality also, because the Boer War signalled a straining of ties between Britain and Germany. Where relations in the nineteenth century had rested on foundations of admiration, respect and even royal family ties, the Boer War did not bode well for the new century. In international politics the Kaiser's Germany was determined to show that it had

arrived as a world power; it could barely do so without provoking the ire of the British Empire, accustomed to having its way in world affairs.

In hindsight that war, in which the German state's sympathies with the Boers came to the fore, appears as little more than a hiccup in German–British relations; the calamity came later. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 cast a shadow over relations between Germany and Britain, which darkened further in 1933. Inevitably it stretched across the world, reaching South Australia, where Germans and those of German descent, despite an impeccable record of loyalty and industry, fell under suspicion. Thereafter, Germans and their contributions to South Australia were viewed differently; the rose-coloured glasses were laid aside, if not snapped in anger and buried. Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the profundity of the change which came over South Australia's – indeed perhaps the world's – estimation of Germany and the Germans after the multiple catastrophes of 1914 to 1945. Where once they were commonly viewed as industrious, tolerant, creative and open to the broader world, from the perspective of the post-Hitler era they were more likely to be viewed as closed-minded belligerents who collectively had brought the world misery and destruction.

The record of the onset of those soured relations during the Great War is not a happy one; its numerous manifestations – internments, the changing of place names, vitriolic attacks and open violence in communities, the closing of German schools – have been recorded elsewhere. Our attention turns to the period after the Great War, to efforts to restore relations and rebuild confidence, but also to some of the enduring damage of 1914's rupture: the stubborn persistence of distrust and animosity which developed on both sides of the tragic German–British divide.

Angela Heuzenroeder's chapter offers a fascinating, culinary perspective on those relations. The date of the appearance of the first edition of the renowned *Barossa Cookery Book* is by itself momentous – in 1917 relations had truly reached their nadir. Yet the publication of this book as response to a crisis spoke at once of a heightened sense of regional identity and also of a commitment to common efforts and causes transcending the poisoned international politics of the day. Fifteen years later, the next edition of the

cookbook similarly attested to the power of culture and community to mend damage which at some moments must have appeared permanent. In a similar vein – albeit with an emphasis on drink rather than wine, but like Angela Heuzenroeder according a central role to the activities of women in the affirmation of a regional identity – Julie Tolley looks to the labour of women in Barossa vineyards. She traces it back to the nineteenth century, when German settlers in the Barossa were sufficiently creative and imaginative to recognise the potential of the budding wine industry, and then follows important lines of continuity which run through not just one but two world wars.

The second edition of the *Barossa Cookery Book* appeared just a few months before Adolf Hitler was appointed to the Chancellorship of Germany. At the time, the import of that event was not immediately obvious, and it was not only among German–Australian communities that the Third Reich found its admirers. This collection tries to present something of the breadth of responses among German Australians. As Barbara Poniewierski demonstrates, there were those whose enthusiasm for Hitler knew no bounds; they proudly adopted the trappings of the new regime. While some came to rue the Nazis' success, particularly after the outbreak of war, there were those who remained unbowed and steadfast. Relatively small in number, they suffered the consequences. For still others, an initial temptation was to welcome the efforts Hitler promoted to overcome the ignominy of the Versailles Treaty, to deal with the Depression and to restore Germany to its proper place in the world. Support for Hitler – to begin with at least – was an expression of respect for German culture in all its guises, a respect which was regarded as entirely compatible with loyalty to Australia. Yet in many cases initial enthusiasm was tempered, loyalties were challenged, strained or even divided. Christine Winter examines the dilemmas created by the competing loyalties facing the German-born women who were brought to Australia from New Guinea mission stations. For them, war posed painful challenges concerning their senses of place, belonging and emotional attachment.

In most cases there was no such ambivalence. Paul Pfeiffer came from a long line of German settlers in a region east of Point Pass straddling the Goyder Line. Such was the durability of his family's

German heritage that he could speak and write in German; he was steeped in both an Anglo and – thanks to level of education rare among his contemporaries – a German cultural tradition. At the same time he felt entirely comfortable in the literary idiom of Australian modernism; indeed he established himself as a seminal figure among the 'Angry Penguins'. With the outbreak of war, there was no question of where he would place his loyalty. As in the First World War, so in the second there were countless Australians of German descent who exhibited their loyalty through armed service, often directed against the land of their origins. Pfeiffer was just one of many who paid the ultimate price.

For German Jews, too, there could be no such ambivalence in those interesting times. My own piece on Jewish refugees explores the efforts in South Australia to lend a helping hand to those whom the Nazis, driven by an unparalleled racial mania, were to slate for extermination. Astonishingly, some of those efforts came from within the Lutheran Churches in South Australia, from people who were upholders and promoters of German culture, but who could not reconcile their love of Germany with the vicious and visceral racism which characterised the Third Reich. The life of one of those who fled the Reich to find a new home in Adelaide, the Lutheran educator Karl Mützelfeldt, is portrayed by Volker Stolle, who follows the course of Mützelfeldt's life from his upbringing, education and work in Germany, through the momentous decision to emigrate (his wife was regarded by the Nazis as a 'Half-Jew'), to his distinguished career in Australia.

* * *

Immediately after the war it was not easy for Germans to follow in the wake of all those who had come earlier; as after the Great War, resentments and suspicions did not die quickly. Yet as they did, many of the features of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German immigrants revealed themselves once more. Individually there were people of great integrity and achievement among the post-war immigrants, such as the theologian Hermann Sasse. Like many, as Maurice Schild shows, Sasse agonised long and hard over the complicity of his fellow Germans in the horrific crimes committed in the name of the Third Reich. After his arrival in

Adelaide in 1949 he steadily developed through his writings and his teaching the reputation of a Lutheran theologian of international import.

The Germans who followed the same path as Sasse through the 1950s and 1960s, like their counterparts a century earlier, distinguished themselves through their industry and the ease with which they integrated into South Australia. A useful indicator of this process, adopted by Ingrid Münstermann, is the membership of clubs. The abundance of clubs open to those with German heritage or with an interest in things German testifies to the continuity of a German presence from the early years of European settlement. Yet the history of those clubs also illuminates the need felt by many immigrants for a kind of cultural comfort zone, where they could speak their native language and exchange experiences with those of similar backgrounds. In the process of acculturation they were vital and moreover they were successful. As Münstermann shows, the acculturation rate of post-war immigrants was extraordinarily high. It is a sign of that very success that among the crowds one might find at the German Club or the *Schützenfest* are many who have absolutely no need to cultivate some sense of German identity. The surviving trappings of 'symbolic identity' can be enjoyed by all – a sure sign of shared comfort in multiculturalism.

If the German-Australian 'success story' were to be personified, then one might choose any member of the Heysen family. The venerable Hans Heysen was of course born in Germany and was to receive some of his training in Europe, but both his name and the vast majority of his works are inextricably linked to South Australia and its landscapes. His is an example of an adaptation to a radically new world which extends beyond his personal, professional and social life and into every aspect of his art and the multiple genres he mastered. His daughter Nora, whose life and work are portrayed here by Cathy Speck, is of another generation and readily embraces and expands the Australian artistic idiom her father had done so much to establish. With her emphasis on Heysen's work as an official war artist in the Second World War, Speck investigates the sensitive issue of loyalty, one with which Hans Heysen had been confronted in the Great War. Both father and daughter happily had careers which extended long beyond the wars, Hans dying in 1968

and Nora in 2003. As much as any place in South Australia their home, The Cedars, which many a contemporary visitor experiences as a kind of artistic-cum-spiritual retreat, epitomises the rich and easy fusion of generations and of cultures.

Notes

1 Friedrich Gerstäcker, *Reise um die Welt. Bd. 4. Australien*, http://www.lexikus.de/Reisen-4-Band-Australien. Translation by the author.

2 Lesli Bodi, 'Gerstaecker, Friedrich (1816–1872)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1972, p. 242.

Hermann Koeler's observations on South Australia in 1837 and 1838

Peter Mühlhäusler

Introduction

The important contribution made by German scholars to the exploration and understanding of Aboriginal Australia is widely recognised, but this recognition is not always translated into action.[1] Many published documents have remained underexploited, and the knowledge of unpublished German sources remains patchy, despite the fact that much material is located in Australian archives. Hermann Koeler's observations on South Australia are a case in point – they have remained unknown to Australian scholars until very recently. Neither Rob Foster's comprehensive account of early contact history in South Australia, nor Rob Amery's PhD thesis on the Kaurna language (although this has been remedied in the published version), nor the important article by Jane Simpson on the contact languages of the Adelaide area make mention of them.[2]

The German historian Reinhard Wendt suggests that in the nineteenth century, long before the invention of the internet, there was a highly developed communication network through which European missionaries working at the frontiers of the civilised world transmitted their knowledge to academics in their home countries.[3] This was not a one-way transmission of new facts and findings, but a highly interactive process of communication. There was a second, secular network, which involved educated Europeans residing in or travelling on business to remote parts of the world who communicated their findings back to academics in Europe and who at times engaged in academic debates. One of these debates concerned the intellectual and linguistic status of 'primitive' people.

The question of whether the dark-skinned inhabitants of Africa and Australia were capable of intellectual and spiritual progress was fiercely debated by scholars, colonial administrators and missionaries, and Koeler was well aware of the pertinence of his records to this debate.

Examples of the exchange of information and ideas include the study of languages (philology) and the disciplines of anthropology and geography (in particular, human geography), which emerged in nineteenth-century Germany. While these new disciplines flourished in Germany, there was neither the money nor trained personnel to support the number of expeditions needed to gather information, and there were many armchair academics who relied almost exclusively on reports sent to them from all corners of the globe. Information was obtained from numerous educated Germans in all parts of the world, who either willingly provided information when written to, or who supplied information to scholars back home on their own initiative.

Hermann Koeler

One of the many informants who corresponded with researchers back home in Germany was the German ship's doctor Hermann Koeler. What makes Koeler a particularly interesting figure is that he was one of the first Germans to visit South Australia and to report on the conditions which prevailed in the first years of the colony. When Koeler arrived in October 1837, aged 24 years, there were probably about a dozen Germans in Adelaide, who had arrived on the *Coromandel* and the *South Australian*. His own vessel was the *Solway*, which was under charter to the South Australian Company to take 52 German migrants to the new colony, along with a cargo which included supplies for the company's whaling station at Encounter Bay and boilers and machinery for the company's operations at Kingscote.[4] The German migrants were mainly young single men, agricultural labourers, carpenters and bakers, but a few were married men with families, and none of them appears to have left a written record about the experience of the early days of South Australia.

Who, then, was Hermann Koeler? How did he fit into the scientific internet, and what was his specific contribution to our

knowledge of South Australia in the earliest years of the colony? An extensive search for information about Koeler in both Germany and Australia has yielded disappointingly little of any consequence. We know that Koeler was a medical doctor and that he was born on 3 August 1813 in Celle, Germany. His parents were Friederich Ludewig Koeler and Charlotte Wilhelmine Julie Wichmann. Little is known about this family of 10 children. No reliable information about Hermann's studies and employment has been found to date. What is known is that he travelled widely between 1837 and 1848, presumably supported by his income as a ship's doctor. There is no evidence that he was in the employ of a university or a scientific organisation, but he appears to have been in the habit of submitting manuscripts to Professor Carl Ritter, the founder of modern German geography, and one of the founding members of the *Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*. During his travels as a ship's doctor Koeler set foot on all five continents, and he left behind three known publications dealing with diverse topics. The first was in the form of two papers based on his 1837–38 visit to South Australia, printed in a journal in 1842 and 1844, [5] the second a 1848 book on the people and language on the coast of Guinea, and the third a book on the temperature measurements he took during several voyages in the Atlantic, published in 1849.

His reports were read by Professor Ritter and subsequently published by Dieterich in Göttingen, a university town relatively close to Koeler's birthplace, Celle. Kremer, a twentieth-century commentator, notes that Ritter disapproved of the blatant racism in Koeler's work and that he added critical question marks and exclamation marks when using Koeler's information in his own work.[6] We can thus not be sure that the printed versions of the reports he submitted were not edited.

The title of both of Koeler's papers was 'Einige Notizen über die Eingeborenen an der Ostküste des St. Vincent-Golfs, Süd-Australien; 1837 und 1838' ('Some notes on the Aborigines on the East coast of the St Vincent Gulf, South Australia; 1837 and 1838'). Koeler began his visit to Adelaide some time in late 1837, and during a mishap in April or May 1838 he lost his notebook and his collection of plant specimens. He had intended to board the English brig *Lady Wellington* at Encounter Bay in April 1838 to

travel to Launceston, but the whaleboat which was to take him to this vessel capsized. He eventually boarded the *Lady Wellington* and arrived in Launceston on 14 May 1838. According to the shipping lists in the *Colonial Times* (Tasmania), he appears as Dr Keller on the passenger list, while a mysterious character named Dr Holdier is listed as a passenger departing from Hobart on 11 December of the same year on the *Brougham*. Given that Koeler was a medical man (a profession notorious for its idiosyncratic handwriting) and that he would have used pre-Suetterlin Gothic script, it seems likely that his name was misinterpreted, and this is one of the causes of his apparent elusiveness. As regards his research in Tasmania, no records have been found.

Another reason for Koeler's elusiveness is that he appears to have avoided contact with officials. In South Australia he did not seek an interview with the Protector of Aborigines or the Governor and does not comment on them in his reports.[7] While avoiding both the influential Europeans and being dismissive of the lower-class Europeans, Koeler spent much of his time in South Australia with Aboriginal people and appears to have made friends among them. The children in particular were fond of him, as he was a source not only of excitement but also of food (1842, p. 54):

> My favourite, little *Williammi* had the crest of a cockatoo at the back of his neck and the end of a dog's tail hanging down to the middle of his back; kangaroo teeth were attached to some of the bunches of his black hair, twisted together in a sausage shape with gum; his scalp was heavily made up with ochre and his neck decorated with a string of red glass beads. His long brownish downy hair looked like a beard on his cheeks and covered his back like a pelt; but the body was not yet deformed by the ugly, thick rope-like scars. Long before I caught sight of him, his cheery '*Tommi, Tommi*' (for I had adopted this name since it was easy to pronounce) rang out to greet me, and he ran to me rejoicing, clasped his arms around my legs – and begged for '*birketti*' (biscuit).

In examining Koeler's two papers on early Adelaide I would like to address three questions. What new information about the early days of the Colony of South Australia and its inhabitants do they contain? What can we learn about the ideological position

taken by Koeler? And, finally, is there a particularly German twist to Koeler's tale?

New information

In answering that first question, linguist Heidi Kneebone has suggested that Koeler probably plagiarised Dampier's earlier accounts of Aboriginal people, and it is not always clear whether his account of events in Adelaide represents his own observations or newspaper reports.[8] Tom Gara, by contrast, is of the opinion that Koeler was a pretty accurate recorder of events and that his records both confirm and add to the early first-hand accounts of Henry Watson, William Wyatt, William Williams and Louis Piesse.[9] Koeler's contribution to our understanding of the relations between Aborigines and white settlers in the first years of the colony is significant because he did not represent any official body. Unlike Protector Wyatt, who painted a picture of relative racial harmony, Koeler's account is more disturbing. His observations of an incident taking place on 6 December 1838, when a white settler hunting for quail accidentally wounded two Aboriginal men, indicate that the Aboriginal companions of the wounded men threatened to set all the settlers' huts on fire, an account confirmed later by James Backhouse.[10] Koeler reports other incidents of friction and threats between settlers and Aborigines not reported elsewhere. He comments on the great antipathy of the lower-class colonists towards the 'black brutes' and indicates that the colonists had loaded rifles in their rooms and that they took them even on short journeys.

Koeler also comments on the mistrust the Aboriginal people had for the settlers. None of these tensions surfaces in the official quarterly reports submitted by the Protector to the British Government. Koeler also gives a picture of the negative effects of contact with the whites in two other domains. The spread of white settlers and their animals had a most detrimental effect on the local wildlife, with the reduction of huntable animals resulting in Aboriginal people begging for or stealing the settlers' food. The beginning of a culture of dependency was compounded by the commencement of a dependency on alcohol. The disintegration of Aboriginal society so early in the colony's life also had a medical side, as Koeler emphasises (1844, p. 61), in particular the spread of

venereal disease through the Aboriginal community:

> As a gift of the whites, and above all of the sailors who are not very particular, syphilitic illnesses have already manifested themselves here and there, and have also found victims among the whites. One black in fact, who had spent time with the whalers of *Encounter Bay*, killed a sailor through whom his two wives had been infected.

In sum, Koeler regarded the early colonists as neither peaceful nor beneficial to the local Aborigines and he refers to an 'uneducated and brutal' (1844, p. 61) element amongst them.

While Koeler focuses on the Aboriginal community, he also made a significant contribution to our understanding of the living conditions of the about 2000 white settlers in the early years of Adelaide. Conditions were harsh and life was very expensive, as there was an inflation of the price of all basic needs. Milk was virtually unobtainable and beef and mutton were rare, as the grazing industry was still in its infancy. Koeler comments on the lack of a reliable source of drinking water and he complains about the constant smoke pollution caused by the Aborigines' habit of hunting with fire and accidentally starting fires, mentioning an unwelcome side effect (1844, p. 60):

> By far the majority of the immigrants suffer, in the first summer (winter) [Koeler's parenthetical addition is for the benefit of his northern hemisphere readers] that they experience in the colony, inflamed infections of the eyes, principally of the eyelids and the conjunctiva over a period of 3–4 or 6 weeks … As the causes of this I have already stated that the reflection of the sun off the sandy ground, denuded of its plant cover by fire; the terrible dust; the sudden transition from warmth to cold at sunrise and sunset, the countless swarms of insects and the dense smoke of the resin-rich woods must be stressed above all.

Koeler's own accommodation in Glenelg during his stay was representative of what the early settlers had to put up with (1844, p. 45):

> *Holdfast Bay* (*Port Glenelg*) in 1838 consisted of four reed huts (one of them a warehouse for the South Australian Co.), two tents and

> two or three plank sheds, inhabited by a boatbuilder, an innkeeper, a warehouse supervisor and a fisherman; in addition there were two *private gentlemen*, and I had the honour of being one of them for a lengthy period. The huts are located immediately behind the sandy dunes with some bushes growing on them, on the southern side of a small creek, almost dry at ebb-tide. To the north, after the mouth of the *16-mile-creek* and beyond, the beach is bordered only by low dunes, mostly rising as a single wall of 20–30 feet in height [emphasis in original].

Koeler gives extensive details about the physical conditions of the colony, its sparse vegetation cover, its seasons and its geology, observations which are astonishingly perceptive, considering his youth. Many of these physical conditions of the early colony have become altered beyond all recognition. An example is his description of the River Torrens (1842, Appendix 1):

> So the *Torrens River*, which divides *Adelaide Town* in a northern and a southern half, comes down from these hills and really deserves the name of river only in the rainy period, when it plunges along, deep and torrential, destroying great sections of its steep banks and often whirling in cascades over gigantic trees which it has torn down from its edge and jammed across its bed at narrower places. But in the dry season it offers the unique spectacle of a river which does not flow but still contains water. For the river bed consists almost exclusively of individual widenings (mostly with steep 15–20 feet high banks) which reach a not inconsiderable depth even in summer, and while varying in length are seldom more than 30–40 feet wide, and often have a far lesser width. These widenings, which form individual reservoirs, are separated from one another by extremely shallow places, which perhaps originated initially when trees torn loose by the torrent became stuck fast and formed dams against which masses of debris and earth were deposited, thus effecting a partial raising of the river bed, with the water of the upper reservoir later re-establishing communication with the lower through narrow clefts. In the hot season the water flows over these places in streams barely a foot wide and only inches deep, and very frequently one finds the water of almost all the small and larger *pools* stagnating, and only a little water seeps perhaps underground

> through the small pebbles. These shallows vary in length from several feet to 20 or 30 paces. Apart from the fact that one can jump over the river at all these points, a number of trees which have fallen diagonally across the wider places immediately at water level or at some height above it form natural bridges; and only when the rainy season floods the shallower and lower stretches of riverbank is the crossing more difficult. The river can then be followed to the *creek* 6 English *miles* from Adelaide, while it normally disappears in the so-called *reed-beds* only a half hour beyond the town. This is a shallow swampy surface overgrown with high reeds which provides the most welcome material for the first huts of the new arrivals [emphasis in original].

One of the most substantial contributions Koeler made was his notes on the Kaurna language, which predated the missionaries Teichelmann and Schürmann's 1840 account. Apparently they were not aware of Koeler's writings. Koeler was not a trained linguist, and what he recorded was not the Kaurna language as spoken in the Kaurna community, but a greatly simplified version thereof. Indigenous people in many parts of the globe deliberately simplify their language when communicating with Europeans, that is, they create a kind of foreigner talk or pidgin. There can be no doubt that he mistook an impoverished contact jargon for the language of the Adelaide 'tribe'. Mistaking the simplified form of speech used to address outsiders for the real thing was not uncommon in those days and it reinforced the prevailing prejudice that languages spoken by indigenous people were deficient and primitive. As Koeler opines: 'the language of such lowly-ranked people cannot be other than limited and under-developed' (1842, p. 48).

In particular, as the next text demonstrates, Koeler, like numerous contemporaries, accuses the Kaurna people of not being able to manage abstract concepts (1842, p. 48):

> Concerning the very small range of this glossary, I cannot refrain from making reference to the difficulties which present themselves to anyone researching the names of nouns, adjectives and verbs which cannot be perceived by the senses. In communicating with people who possess such a dearth of concepts despite the adequacy of their powers of comprehension, one must attempt to abstract the qualities of certain

objects, whereby gesticulation is perhaps the only means of clarifying the ideas on both sides, or at the very least as many comparisons and combinations as possible are necessary if one wants to be certain that both sides have clearly understood one another.

The alleged primitiveness of the Kaurna language is illustrated in other ways as well. Koeler seemed not to have been aware of verbal morphology, a point he acknowledged himself when he noted: 'I could not detect any trace of declension or conjugation and the verb exists only in the infinitive form' (1842, p. 49). His failure to record inflections in the language has an interesting consequence. In his descriptions, the distinction between grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs becomes very much attenuated, and this may explain the confusion of 'seawater' and 'drinking' mentioned below, and others such as 'spearpoint' and 'scrape'. To what extent this confusion is Koeler's, and to what extent it exists in pidgin Kaurna, can no longer be ascertained.

Poverty of expression is another stereotype prevalent at the time. Koeler lists about 140 Kaurna words, some of which are simple one-word translations, others are amplified with encyclopedic information. Amery has carried out a thorough examination of this wordlist in the edited texts.[11] He has identified a number of mistranslations such as when he glosses *ķopurlo*, 'seawater' as 'he drinks' and *wiltunna*, 'eagles' as 'to fly'. Koeler does not distinguish Kaurna words from words of pidgin English that had spread to South Australia from New South Wales such as *maķitti*, 'musket gun' or *waddi*, 'club'. Moreover, the document is not free from printer's errors. Still, Koeler adds a small number of Kaurna words not elicited by Teichelmann and Schürmann and others to our knowledge of the Kaurna language, and he is at his best when he provides encyclopedic information, as in his description of *ķúngula* (= *ķungurla*), 'yabbies' and how they are caught (1842, p. 52), the first eyewitness account we have of how Kaurna children caught yabbies.

Often one sees the little blacks stretched out on half washed-out and fallen tree trunks which lean out over the river or are already partly sunken in it, attracting them with a piece of fat or meat stuck on the end of small spears.