

The Bible and Shakespeare for Aborigines

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I was very interested to read in the February issue of *Dawn* what Mr. W. J. Reid of Enanaral Station, Wanaaring Road, Bourke, had to say about translating the Bible into aboriginal dialects.

My colleague on the Aborigines' Welfare Board, Prof. A. P. Elkin, in company with that wonderful linguist Dr. Capel of the Anthropology Dept. of the Sydney University, have already done an enormous amount of research in that direction, for a number of years.

The problem of translating the Bible into aboriginal dialects, of which I believe there are over five hundred, is in my opinion, too difficult for practical purposes.

Apart from academic interests, such translations are unnecessary, for the aborigines would have to learn two languages. Their own in printed form and then English.

The arranging of the phonetic spelling and the syntax of a spoken dialect into a printed language is much the same as evolving a new language.

Now that the policy of aboriginal welfare all over Australia is assimilation, it is more practical for all aborigines to learn to read and write English.

I think that most of the missionaries and government stations are agreed upon that policy now.

The Federal Government is spending a great deal of money upon aboriginal education in the Northern Territory and the missionaries have also greatly improved their methods of educating aborigines.

My knowledge of missionaries goes back to 1900 when I first visited the Lutheran Mission at Coppramanna on the Cooper, on the Birdsville track. The methods of teaching aborigines in those days were very crude. That famous Mission long since in ruins, was conducted by good old Pastor Voglestein. I also knew well Mr. Sid Hadley of the Sunday Island Mission in Kings Sound near Derby. Here again the method of teaching aborigines was very elementary, but of course the missionaries had a very difficult task, as they were contacting wild bush aborigines for the first time.

A few years ago I visited Ernabella Mission and saw the Superintendent translating the Gospel of St. John into the Pintjarra dialect. He had the aid of some more or less educated Christian aborigine young men and women. I have no wish to appear critical, but at the time I doubted the wisdom of this translation, for the Fourth Gospel, is one of the most difficult and metaphysical in the Bible.

The first time I met Albert Namatjira in Alice Springs was on a Sunday morning and he invited me to attend Church with him, which I was most happy to do. I was the only white man present and the service was in the Arunta dialect. The aborigines knew the Lutheran service well. They sang the hymns beautifully and then repeated the responses perfectly. The late Blind Moses immaculately dressed delivered a most eloquent sermon, of which I only knew one word, and that was Abraham, and when I asked Albert who Abraham was, he replied "The Father of everybody."

Mission aborigines delight in the Old Testament stories, for they are much the same as their own age old myths and legends. They delight in the story of Creation as told in Genesis. The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Also the story of squatter Job, with all his goats, sheep, she asses, camels and five hundred yoke of oxen and then they immediately think, what a lot of bullock waggons Job must have had. They also cry over the story of Ruth and Naomi, and when Ruth says to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, "Whither thou goest I go, for your people are my people, your country my country and your God my God," the aborigines are delighted, for that also is a very ancient tribal custom of theirs. I am very much in favour of teaching the aborigines to read the Bible in English, rather than in a dialect, for when they know the Bible in English, that gives them a sense of being equal with the white man in religion, and religion is always the most binding influence among all people.

I have often thought, that I would like to teach aborigines parts of Shakespeare. They would appreciate Puck and Ariel better than many white people, for they are great psychics and the bush is alive to them. Everywhere the bush is peopled with the spirits of departed aborigines.

They would delight in the evil Caliban, for to them Caliban would be an "Irrawally" (a Devil). They would shriek with delight when Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, brings Caliban and the drunken sailors to heel. They would appreciate the ghost in *Hamlet* and all the other supernatural features in the plays. The terrible dream of the Duke of Clarence, which was lengthened after life in Richard the 3rd, would make our aborigines shudder with delight. I have seen many wonderful changes in aborigine welfare since 1900 and fantastic as it may seem, I may yet see aborigines reading and appreciating the plays of Shakespeare.