OBITUARY FOR RONALD MURRAY BERNDT (1916-1990)

Robert and Myrna Tonkinson

Emeritus Professor Ronald M. Berndt died in Perth on 2 May 1990 after a protracted battle with cancer. Together with Catherine Berndt, his wife and fellow anthropologist, he did more anthropological research in a greater number of Aboriginal communities over a longer time span than any other Australianist, as well as pioneering research in the eastern Highlands of New Guinea (1951-53). This partnership has been one of the most abiding and scholastically productive in anthropology, and the Berndts' prodigious output of richly detailed and important works on Aboriginal societies and cultures has brought them international renown.

Ronald Berndt was born in Adelaide on Bastille Day, 1916, the grandson of German immigrants, and grew up there in what he has described as a 'happy liberal environment'.¹ He became interested in ethnology as a teenager, and in 1938 became a member of the Anthropological Society and the Royal Society of South Australia. The following year he was appointed an Honorary Assistant Ethnologist at the South Australian Museum, and it was there that his interest in Aborigines and their culture burgeoned. A field expedition to Ooldea in 1939 convinced him of the need for formal training in what had by then become his chosen field. He enrolled in social anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1940, under Elkin, Hogbin and Capell. There he met fellow student Catherine (née Webb) and they were married soon after. Then followed a decade devoted almost entirely to joint fieldwork: at Ooldea in the Western Desert; among urban people in South Australia and New South Wales; and in the Northern Territory. There they investigated labour conditions on cattle stations, worked on Army settlements and did intensive research in both western and northeastern Arnhem Land. Their desire to broaden their ethnographic horizons then took them to a remote area in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea. Following this research, the Berndts went to London to write their doctorates under Professor (later Sir) Raymond Firth at London School of Economics and Political Science. Of their impact at LSE, Firth has written: 'What particularly impressed their contemporaries ... was their already extensive first-hand field knowledge, their wide command of the scholarly literature of anthropological theory, and their intense focus upon the discipline of anthropology as a joint activity.'²

Their published works were already beginning to have an impact in European anthropological circles, where the dominant image of Aborigines, derived from early documentary sources and made famous by Durkheim and others, was of a people frozen in the past and encapsulated within rule-bound and rigid institutional frameworks. After World War II, Elkin's work reached the Continent, but it was read in the light of his great predecessors and thus failed to register as something new. According to Claude Lévi-

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¹ See 'The Berndts: a biographical sketch', in R. Tonkinson and M. Howard eds., *Going it alone? Prospects for Aboriginal autonomy; essays in honour of Ronald and Catherine Berndt*. Canberra, 1990.

² Firth, Raymond. 'Foreword', in Tonkinson and Howard (above).

Strauss, it was the writings of the Berndts that jolted European scholars into a new appreciation of Aboriginal culture: 'They were putting us in direct contact with a real, vibrant, present-day Australia' through the 'richness and originality' of their work. 'We now became convinced that those old studies which had engendered an enormous literature, to the point where we thought their content was exhausted, could be followed up, deepen and renewed.'³ Ronald's ethnography, *Excess and restraint*, based on his Melanesian research and published in the United States in 1962, aroused considerable controversy among Melanesianists at the time concerning the nature and degree of violence depicted, but later research in the same region by other anthropologists has tended to confirm his conclusions.

One of Berndt's many major contributions to the social anthropology of Aboriginal Australia has been in the study of religion, particularly myth, ritual and song-poetry. He also wrote insightfully on law and order in both Aboriginal and Melanesian contexts, and gained considerable international recognition for his writings on Aboriginal art. In fact, his interests embraced virtually every aspect of the structure and functioning of Aboriginal societies, and his and Catherine's work, with men and women respectively, was complementary. Their highly successful text, *The world of the first Australians*, is ample testimony to their breath and depth of coverage of Aboriginal Australia, both geographically and topically.

After graduating in 1955, the Berndts returned to Australia, and in 1956 moved to Perth, where Ronald had been appointed as a Senior Lecturer in anthropology, initially with the Psychology Department. He and Catherine pioneered the teaching of anthropology and sociology in Western Australia, and in 1963 Ronald Berndt became Foundation Professor and head of a separate Anthropology Department. He oversaw the steady growth of the Department, including the inception of teaching in Linguistics and Archaeology, and anthropology became one of the larger units in the Arts and Science Faculties. He retired in 1981 and was made Emeritus Professor. He retained an office in the Department, continued his writing and contributed to the Department through lecturing, seminar participation and his active role in the Anthropology Research Museum, which he had established at the university.

In addition to founding the Anthropology Society of Western Australia, and the international journal *Anthropological Forum*, Ronald Berndt worked closely with State authorities charged with the administration of Aboriginal affairs and did much to publicise the valuable contribution made by applied anthropology, which had long been one of his central concerns. The true extent of his influence on public administration in the Aboriginal field will never be fully known, but Ronald Berndt wrote hundreds of reports for both State and Federal bodies on matters of policy and Aboriginal welfare. Both Berndts have been strong supporters of lands rights, and during the Nookanbah crisis Ronald received extensive press coverage, and withstood much criticism, when he attacked the biased and racist campaigns being waged against Aborigines and land rights. On the national level, Ronald Berndt was a member of the first branch of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth to be formed in this country, and he became its first president (1962-64). In 1972, this body was absorbed into the newly formed Australian Anthropological Society. From the very inception of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Ronald Berndt played a major role in its establishment and in the later operation of the Institute's affairs. He remained totally committed to the Institute's goal of fostering high quality field research.

Ronald and Catherine Berndt have produced a huge body of scholarly works on Aboriginal Australia. They have also written a number of books aimed specifically at the

³ Lévi-Strauss, C. 'The Berndts: an appreciation', in Tonkinson and Howard (above).

RONALD MURRAY BERNDT

non-specialist reader, in keeping with their insistence that Aborigines would be unable to take their rightful place in our society unless and until European Australians knew and understood about the richness and diversity of Aboriginal cultures, and learned the truth of what followed the European invasion. Those of us privileged to have been his students will all remember Ron's insistence on the need to understand both communities and changes, and the edifice of knowledge that he and Catherine have constructed in their massive corpus of writings, both scholarly and popular, reflects both concerns: to bring to the world the richness and genius of Aboriginal intellectual and cultural achievement, and to document and decry much of what has befallen them as a result of colonisation. Ronald Berndt's work was his consuming passion - his entry in Who's Who lists as his only hobby, anthropology; however, this characteristic of his humour masked what were for him other strong interests, especially in the arts and in gardening. His was a joyous devotion, and his enthusiasm certainly rubbed off on his former students. Many of us can recall Ron telling about his latest project with great excitement and pleasure - certainly, during the writing up of his Lower River Murray data a few years ago, almost half a century after he did the fieldwork, his delight at the rediscovery of the overwhelming richness of the material he was resurrecting, was infectious.

The battle with cancer slowed Ron down but did not, until very recently, stop his work; there was always a sense of urgency, about so much yet to do, and so much getting done - his prodigious output has never ceased to amaze all who knew him. Up until weeks ago, when he entered hospital, he was busy writing, attending seminars and providing advice and support to other scholars. Ron Berndt touched many lives as a teacher, mentor, scholar, writer, colleague and friend, but for those privileged to have been his students, what stands out was his unwavering support and encouragement, once he sensed in others something of the commitment and enthusiasm for anthropology that he had.

Ron enjoyed conviviality. He was a generous and most attentive host and liked nothing more than to entertain friends, colleagues or visitors over a meal that featured good red wine, good food and conversation both serious and lighthearted, and of course, for Ron, a puff or two on his beloved pipe at the end. Many will remember his delight in telling stories jointly with Catherine, and checking on, or debating, the details with her. He loved seminars, making comments - sometimes quite outrageous in their premeditated provocativeness - and was always delighted when he drew the animated responses he was seeking.

We mourn Ron's death and in particular the severance of his half-century partnership with Catherine - a close, loving and academically so productive relationship. All who know them are aware they worked and lived as a team, and we still find ourselves uttering their names as one. The loss for Catherine is immeasurable, but she has vowed to carry on their work, adding to the already enormous output of invaluable scholarship that is the hallmark of the work of the Berndts, whose place in the world of anthropology is assured.

Ronald Berndt's legacy is immense and permanent: the huge outpouring of scholarly and popular works; the Berndt Aboriginal Art collection, one of the finest of its kind in the world, generously donated by him and Catherine to the Anthropology Research Museum at the University of Western Australia; the scholarship he fostered and nurtured; his unforgettable zest for life and work; and his deep and heartfelt concern for and appreciation of Aboriginal Australians, so many of whom he was proud to call his friends. He will be remembered long for these virtues just as surely as his and Catherine's life's work will stand as a monument to their tireless dedication.