



Frs. Hermann Nekes and Ernest Worms's "Australian Languages"

William B. McGregor

Abstract. – This article describes the circumstances surrounding the recent publication in book form and on CD-ROM of an edited version of Frs. Hermann Nekes and Ernest Worms's "Australian Languages," which originally appeared in microfilm in 1953, as *Micro-Bibliotheca Anthropos* 10. The authors' magnum opus is described and appraised, and is situated in the context of the times; the editorial decisions are outlined, and the most significant differences between the original and edited version remarked on. It is suggested that the main value of the work lies in the documentation it provides of a number of moribund and extinct languages of the northwest of the continent. [*Australian Aboriginal linguistics, missionary linguistics, linguistic historiography, documentary linguistics*]

William B. McGregor, professor of linguistics in the University of Aarhus. His research focus is on the languages of the Kimberley region of the far northwest of Australia, on which he has published grammars and sketch grammars, as well as numerous articles and a general book ("The Languages of the Kimberley, Western Australia." London 2004). He also maintains a strong interest in the history of linguistics, and is currently editing a book on the history of research on Australian languages. – See also References Cited.

Introduction

In mid-1952 the director of the Anthropos Institute, Fritz Bornemann, wrote to Fr. Ernest Worms offering to publish his and Fr. Hermann Nekes's "Australian Languages" on microfilm. It duly appeared the following year, as the tenth volume in the series *Micro-Bibliotheca Anthropos* (Nekes and Worms 1953; cf. Fig. 1). Thus ended the surviving author's long struggle to bring their *magnum opus* to the light of day.

Eight years previously, in 1945, the two Pallottine fathers had considered that their studies of Australian languages were nearing completion, and that their manuscript, "Australian Languages," was ready for publication. They began seeking a publisher in Australia, where they hoped their work would be published. By March 1947 interest of a Melbourne-based publisher had been secured. Thus began a saga of disappointment for the authors: failure to obtain a publication subsidy from the Australian government; failure to obtain the necessary phonetic fonts for the linotype machines; the disappearance without trace of a "well known Catholic gentleman of the city [of Melbourne]" whose assistance in negotiations with the publisher had been enlisted; and ultimately the withdrawal of the publisher from the project. Subsequent attempts to interest Australian publishers failed. Thus Fr. Worms was to sacrifice his ideal of publication within the country, and accept the offer of the Anthropos Institute.

In February 2006, some 61 years after Nekes and Worms had begun looking for a publisher, "Australian Languages" eventually appeared in book form, under the imprint of Mouton de Gruyter, vol. 24 in their series "Trends in Linguistics. Documentation" (Nekes and Worms 2006). The authors' dream was at least partly realized: the main descriptive portion of their work was published in book form, although the dictionaries, which constitute over half of the massive 1065-page work, appeared on an accompanying CD-ROM. And of course, the publisher is a German company.