



ARTHUR CAPELL

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1902-1986

Something like two thousand languages are shown on the *Language Atlas of the Pacific*, published by the Academy of Humanities. At one stage all these languages were being studied, virtually, by a single man, a distinguished Honorary Fellow of the Academy, and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences: Dr Arthur Capell.

Arthur Capell was born on 28 August 1902, and, after a brilliant Leaving Certificate pass at North Sydney High School, studied Classics at Sydney University, receiving the University Medal on his graduation in 1922. His first position was as a teacher of Latin and Greek, and during that time, in 1924, he published (in collaboration with another teacher, E. Bembrick) his first book, a handbook of exercises in Latin composition, and one that tends to be omitted from his bibliography.

In 1925 he yielded to a love of the Anglican church that was as great as his love of languages, and was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England, and a priest in the following year. For the next four years he functioned as a curate, and later priest, in the diocese of Newcastle, before spending the years 1929-1932 as a Classics Master at Broughton Boys' School, Newcastle. He returned to the church in 1932, being curate of Tarce, and later of Morpeth — and, during his PhD studies, curate of Linslade (Diocese of Oxford). Around this time he opted for pursuing an academic career rather than that of a missionary, he retained his connexion with the church for all his life, and in 1956 was given the honour of being an honorary canon of the Cathedral of SS Peter and Paul in Dogura, in Papua New Guinea.

In the 1930s Capell became interested in the languages of the Pacific — as well as finding the time to do a Sydney MA in Classics (1931). At the urging of a later colleague, Professor A.P. Elkin, of the Department of Anthropology at Sydney University, he realised he needed further training, and in 1935 started a PhD at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, using his own resources. He graduated in 1938, presenting a thesis on the Austronesian languages of South-Eastern Papua (published in 1943). His principal mentor was Sidney H. Ray, who had been a student of Otto Dempwolff — an apostolic succession in Austronesian linguistics already extending over half a century, and which Capell in his time passed on to his students.

At about this time he became interested in Australian Aboriginal languages, and began publishing on them in the journal *Oceania*, often with the needs of anthropologists like his friend Professor Elkin in mind. He received a grant

for an Arnhem Land survey in the years 1938 to 1941, but interrupted it to undertake the revision of Hazlewood's Fijian Dictionary; the revision was published in Suva in 1941. In 1944 he joined Sydney University's Department of Anthropology as a temporary lecturer, and remained in that department until his retirement in 1967 as a Reader in Oceanic Languages.

Throughout his professional career, and well into retirement, Arthur Capell continued to make extensive contributions to our knowledge of the languages of the Pacific region. He added research into Papuan languages to that into Australian Aboriginal and Austronesian languages, and published two editions of the South Pacific Commission's *Linguistic Survey of the South-Western Pacific* (1954-1962). His manuals on recording the languages of Aborigines, and of the New Guinea area, were standard tools in the fifties and sixties, as were his textbooks on general linguistics. Students in all his classes testified to his gentle but erudite manner of lecturing, and the ease with which he made instant translations from books in half a dozen different languages.

Capell's students and colleagues acknowledged the value of his work in the form of a Festschrift (published by *Pacific Linguistics*) in 1970, and in 1981 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters from Sydney University. To the end of his life he continued active in both Anglicanism and linguistics, and, with the aid of a research assistant, was able to publish much of his voluminous material on Pacific languages and other linguistic subjects. One such paper will appear, appropriately enough, in a Festschrift devoted to Professor Stephen Wurm, the current President of the Academy of Humanities, who was introduced to Australia, and to the world of Pacific languages, by Arthur Capell.

Arthur Capell died peacefully on 10 August 1986, just eighteen days short of his 85th birthday. He is remembered with affection and respect by all who knew him. Such a man may well share an epitaph with Cicero: *Animo videt, ingenio complexus est, eloquentia illuminavit.*

D. C. Laycock