

Article

Author & Date	Gerhard Ruediger
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We know the names ...

We know the names: Kartanya, Pitpaue, Itya Maii and eight other children, Wailtye, and Ityamaiitpinna, the later teacher's assistant. We know the years: early 1840, 1841, and 1843 – in the early days of South Australia. We know the place: The first (and only) Kurna Language School, Piltawodli (Possum House), at the former Native Location (today the Golf Course between Torrens Lake and North Adelaide). We have images: Not of the children, but of the school – and of the children's writings.

In Lutheran church history writing, as in many other historical records of early settlement in Australia, this is much more than we could ever expect. It is identity.

On 23 December 1939, seven Aboriginal pupils and their parents from the Adelaide Plains began to attend the little school Piltawodli. Three German Lutheran missionaries, Gottlob Teichelmann, Clamor Schürmann and Samuel Klose (from 1840) had set out to teach in the Kurna Language. In his diary entry of that day, Schürmann notes that “Among the latter was also Ityamaiitpinna who had picked up the letters so quickly that he could already provide me with some help.” The following day, he records that 15 children showed up, and they “learn effortless and quickly, and this gives me great joy.” Within a few days, many of the children had grasped the concept of the Alphabet and proved to be students as excellent as you would expect in Germany.

Schürmann and Teichelmann had arrived only one year earlier, the end of October 1838, a month before the first group of Lutherans with Pastor August Kavel. They quickly earned the trust of the local Aboriginal people, the “Adelaide Tribe” (today the “Kurna (Miyurna) Nation”) who taught them their language. There is much to say about the story of these two, and from August 1840 four missionaries. However, this account focuses on the Kurna children.

Teaching was tough, as Teichelmann observed. The pupils, of course, initially depended upon the presence of their parents, and for hunting season, the children left as well. Their accommodation and food had to be organised, with the little money given to the school by the colony. The attention span was short amongst the kids, who were not used to sitting and learning the “letter”. There was, and still is, criticism of the efforts: Was it worth teaching the kids of a dying race? Why keep a doomed language and not teach English? Wasn't it part of the civilizing “mission” of the colonizers to make the natives “useful workers”? However, Klose reports an attendance for 1842 of 2,130 children over 204 days of teaching, an average of 10 children per day and two-third of them girls, indicating the relevance the parents gave to the teaching of their children. In 1843, the Protector of the Aboriginals, Mathew Moorhouse, reported that “that there was no [Aboriginal] child between ... five and ten years ... 60 miles to the North ... and the South that does not know the alphabet, and some are advanced in reading and arithmetic ...”.

These Kurna kids, as for instance Kartanya, were like shooting stars at the night sky. They show up for a brief moment, and then they seem to have gone forever. Yet, these pupils left a legacy of major relevance for Lutheran and mainstream South Australia: Five documents of significant length, written by themselves in their own language and some in beautiful script, when almost everything else got lost. These documents are a religious text, two letters to friends in Germany, a letter to the governor and a note attached to the gift of some melons grown in their garden for him) are prove of the successful efforts of their elders teaching the missionaries their language. They show that the Kurna children learned as effortless and some of them apparently even better as many contemporary settler children. The interaction with the children, on the other hand, helped the missionaries to gain such an understanding of the language that, upon request of the governor, they were able to publish a substantial dictionary and grammar after only two years, in 1840.

Because of these children, the documents surviving in the Dresden Mission archives in Germany, and the dictionary, have become core elements of a most successful reclamation and revival of the Kurna language by the its Aboriginal owners on the Adelaide Plains in the past 20 years (<www.adelaide.edu.au/kwp>).

While Australian Lutheran church histories acknowledge the work of the missionaries, Dresden Mission history writing judged this early missionary project a failure as no Aborigine could be converted to the Christian faith. Hardly any historian, however, recognizes the contribution by the Kurna people themselves, and pays tribute to the actors known in their own right.

The historic papers, handed down to us by these students whose names we know, hint at the trust the Kurna people had in the missionary teachers. “There is a season for everything, and a time for every event under heaven”, says the Ecclesiast (3,1), and in his letter to the Romans Paul responds: “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his adviser? ... For all things are from him, by him, and for him. ” (11,34.36). Without their knowing, the Kurna children at the missionary school Piltawodli laid the foundation for a remarkable revival of their language and culture, aided by three early Lutheran missionaries to South Australia.

Further Reading:

- Ted Schurmann, *I'd rather dig potatoes*, Lutheran Publishing House 1987 (an edited version of the diary of missionary Clamor W Schürmann)
- Samuel Klose, *Missionary to the Kurna: the Klose letters*. Lutheran Archives Adelaide 2002
- Alfred Brauer, *Under the Southern Cross*, Lutheran Publishing House 1985 (Chapter 18)
- Robert Foster, The Aborigines Location in Adelaide: South Australia's first 'mission' to the Aborigines. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*. Vol. 28, nos 1-2, Dec 1990, pp. 11-37.
- Rob Amery, The first Lutheran missionaries in South Australia and their contribution to Kurna language reclamation and the reconciliation movement. *Journal of Friends of Lutheran Archives*, no. 10, Oct 2000, pp. 30-58.

(All publications are out of print, but available through the Lutheran Archives Adelaide or at the SA State Library.)