

BRINGING THE *Von Brandenstein* MATERIALS BACK TO AUSTRALIA

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IN JULY 1964 CARL GEORG VON Brandenstein and his wife Carola headed west from Melbourne, driving their Volkswagen Beetle across to Western Australia and from there up to the Pilbara. This was the beginning of a ten-year period in which Carl Georg collected information on many of the Aboriginal languages of WA. The materials he collected have gradually been located and brought to AIATSIS where they are now available for return to the communities from where they came.¹

Born in Hannover, Germany in 1909, Carl Georg received a PhD in 1940 for his work on Hittite language and culture. With the outbreak of World War II he wound up in the German military as a corporal, eventually being captured by the British in Basra, Iraq in 1941. He was interned in Australia for several years as a prisoner of war and after his release he chose to stay on rather than return to his native Germany.² After some years as an artist and then as a high school teacher Carl Georg happened to visit Arnhem Land in the late 1950s where he became interested in Aboriginal languages, drawing him back to his earlier interest in language and culture. After a few years investigating Aboriginal languages of Central Australia in his spare-time, he applied for and received funding from the then very new Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS, now AIATSIS) to carry out work on the Aboriginal languages of Western Australia. Over the following ten-year period he received ongoing support from AIAS that allowed him to travel the length and breadth of Western Australia (apart from the Kimberley and the deep desert) recording language speakers.

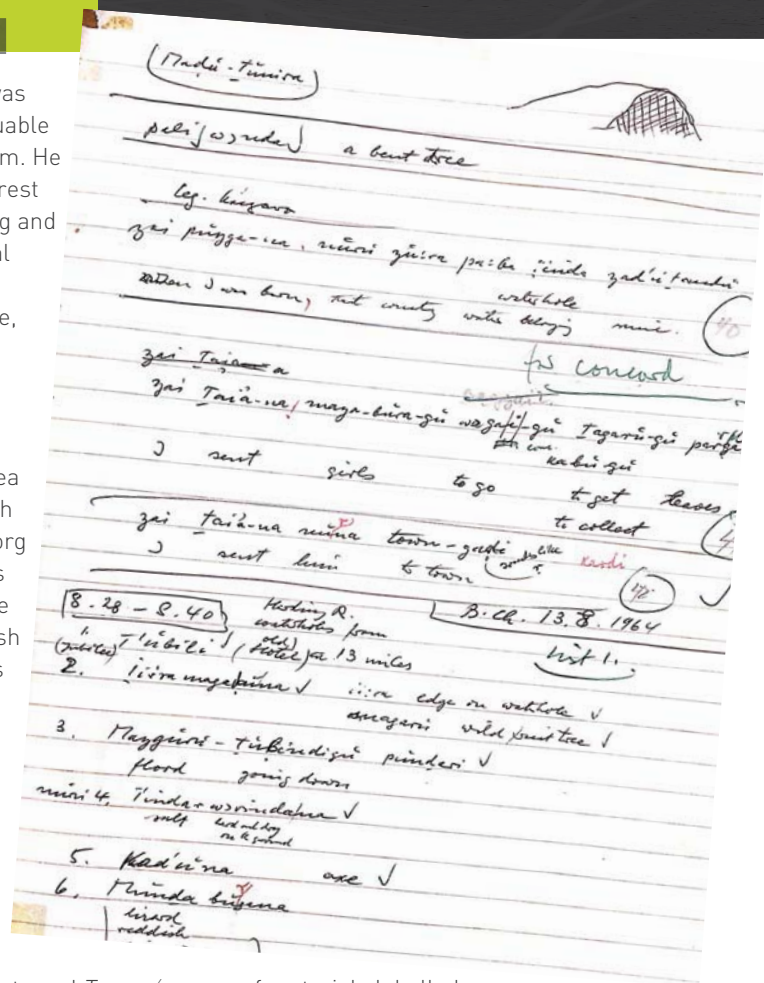
In the 1960s there were still many speakers of most WA languages

and Carl Georg was able to make valuable recordings of them. He had a strong interest in poetry and song and collected material of these types wherever possible, something done by few Australian linguists at the time. The Pilbara region was an area of particularly rich finds for Carl Georg and the materials he collected there lead him to publish a number of texts on the languages of that part of WA, among them Narratives from the North-West of Western Australia³, a collection of Ngarluma and Yinjibarndi texts and *Taruru*⁴, a compilation of songs with appealingly poetic translations.

AIAS funding for this work ceased in 1973 and so Carl Georg's period of travel and intense collection came to an end. However over the next twenty years he continued to work on his collection and produced a series of publications. In the late 1990s Carl Georg fell ill, eventually being hospitalised and passing away in 2005. Although he had deposited part of his collection with AIATSIS it had been noted for some years that there seemed to be many items missing. Various researchers continued to search for the missing documents but without any luck until a German researcher happened to visit the Anthropos Institute (AI) in Sankt Augustin, just outside Cologne, and noticed a pile

of materials labelled 'Dr Von Brandenstein'. Although the motivation was never clear, it turned out that a close friend of Carl Georg, who somewhat mysteriously came to be in possession of a large part of his collection, chose to deposit it with the AI, an ethnographic organisation founded and run by the Divine Word Missionaries at their main seminary in Sankt Augustin. Researchers in Australia were alerted to the presence of this material in Germany. AIATSIS undertook the task of travelling to Sankt Augustin to inventory the collection.

I'm very grateful to the AI staff who kindly gave me 24/7 access to the collection as this allowed me to quickly complete my main task, a full inventory of the collection and then move on to copying it. As the



instructions from the depositor were solely to keep the materials safe, they were not willing to allow it to leave the AI however they were happy for me to digitise it, enabling me to bring copies back to Australia. The collection included Carl Georg's audio recordings on their original tape reels as well as dubbed on to cassettes. I was not able to copy these audio recordings but there was no need as a search of the AIATSIS catalogue Mura showed that they had been deposited. An extremely important part of the collection is the nineteen diaries that record Carl Georg's work over the period 1964–71 and contain a vast amount of language and cultural information. Although photocopies of all but one of these diaries were already held in the AIATSIS Collections they are only in black and white, whereas I was able to scan them in full colour, making the writing much easier to read as well as making it possible to distinguish the original notes from later edits, these being in different colours. Over the days I spent in the AI with Von Brandenstein collection I was able to digitise all of the text items relevant to Australia. Interestingly there were several items in the collection that showed Carl Georg had continued with his early interest in Assyriology, the study of the ancient 'Near East', the main one being a volume of hundreds of pages of handwritten analysis of hieroglyphics and Hittite texts.

All in all, I digitised around 3,000 pages of text, mostly handwritten but also some unpublished typescripts. The great advantage of digital materials is the ease of transport and sharing... within a short time I was able to send copies of the materials to communities and language centres in Western Australia. And of course the digital copies were also deposited in the AIATSIS Collections, the world's premier archive of materials relating to Indigenous Australia, where they will be preserved for perpetuity and available for return to Indigenous communities.



- 1 This article draws heavily on Thieberger, N., 2006. 'Language is like a carpet. Carl Georg von Brandenstein and Australian languages'. In W. M. McGregor (Ed.), *Encountering Aboriginal languages: studies in the history of Australian linguistics* (pp. 321–335). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- 2 This may seem surprising today, but after WWII all POWs of British or European descent were allowed to stay on in Australia if they wished.
- 3 Brandenstein, Carl Georg von, 1970, *Narratives from the North-West of Western Australia in the Ngarluma and Jindjiparndi languages*. (Volumes 1–3 + audio- disc.) Canberra: AIAS.
- 4 Brandenstein, Carl Georg von & Anthony P. Thomas, 1974, *Taruru: Aboriginal song poetry from the Pilbara*. Adelaide: Rigby.

The rich information found in the Carl Georg von Brandenstein materials is often used as supporting evidence in native title claims.

Should you wish to search the von Brandenstein materials held in the AIATSIS collection for use in a native title claim, please contact the Native Title Research and Access Officer, NTSS@aiatsis.gov.au or 02 6261 4223.

Opposite: A page from Carl Georg von Brandenstein's diary.
Credit: Dr Doug Marmion

Top: Dr Doug Marmion working with the Carl Georg von Brandenstein materials at the Anthropos Institute in Sankt Augustin. Credit: Dr Doug Marmion

Above: Boxes of von Brandenstein material held at the Anthropos Institute in Sankt Augustin. Credit: Dr Doug Marmion