

# ARTHUR CAPELL

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

Early in 1931 the headmaster of Broughton Boys' School, Newcastle, suggested that I should meet Arthur Capell, a member of his staff, who was a keen student of Melanesian languages. I did so, and thus an association began which has lasted to this day. Years later, as a visiting speaker, I was given a great welcome by the general assembly of the boys of North Sydney High School. And the reason! The headmaster when introducing me, mentioned that Arthur Capell was a member of the staff of my Department of Anthropology in the University of Sydney. The applause was for him. His name was on the School's Honour Roll of distinguished old boys and I stood in that Assembly in his reflected glory. He had gained a brilliant Leaving Certificate Pass and had capped this by graduating in 1922 as University medallist in Classics.

After graduation Capell became a High School teacher for three years. He was ordained into the ministry of the Church of England in 1925, and held positions in the Diocese of Newcastle for the next ten years, and since then has assisted in Church work from time to time. He has served on Missionary Boards and is an Honorary Canon of the Cathedral at Dogura, Papua. He was invited to be Bishop of a North Australian Diocese (an invitation which I helped him decide to decline), and of a Missionary Diocese. Long before this, it had become clear that linguistics was the field in which he could make his best contribution to knowledge and to educational and missionary work.

## 1. RESPONSE TO A LINGUISTIC CHALLENGE

During field work amongst the Ungarinyin in the Northern Kimberley, Western Australia, 1928, I had to gain a working knowledge

of their language, for only a couple of the Aborigines had any knowledge even of pidgin English. I found that Ungarinyin was complex; e.g. it had verb conjugations with prefixes, suffixes and infixes, and with trial as well as dual number; and it had four noun classes; and pronominal prefixes to nouns; but I had neither the time nor the special training to master these things. Therefore, when Capell became associated with me, I suggested that he might turn some of his linguistic attention to the Australian Aboriginal field. In particular, I had in mind that he might master Ungarinyin. Knowing that specialist qualifications and status were necessary for a person to qualify for research grants and fellowships, I advised him to go to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, to read for the Ph.D. He already had his Sydney Honours M.A. in classics (1931). He did this towards the end of 1935 under his own financial resources and with the help of some part-time work in England.

In the meantime, he wrote articles at my request on 'The Structure of the Oceania Languages' (*Oceania*, 1933), 'The Structure of Australian Languages' (*Oceania*, 1937) and 'The Languages of the Kimberley Division', (*Oceania*, 1937). He was awarded in 1938 the London Ph.D. for a thesis, 'The Linguistic Position of South-Eastern Papua' (published 1943).

Returning to Australia, he received a Fellowship from the Australian National Research Council and carried out a linguistic survey in the Kimberley Division of Western Australia and in the far north of the Northern Territory from May 1938 to January 1940 and again in 1941. Some results of this field-work were published in *Oceania* (Vols. 10-13, 1940-42). This was a pioneering field-survey, which showed the varieties and relationship of the languages of the region. Later he was to extend his survey to other parts of the Northern Territory and to far north Queensland.

While Dr Capell was still in Arnhem Land, a Government Official from Fiji asked me to recommend a linguist who could and would revise Hazlewood's *Fijian Dictionary* (1850). I suggested Dr Capell, and having agreed to the financial provisions, I wrote to him hoping he would accept this commission. He did, although it meant an interruption in his Arnhem Land Survey. After spending the first part of 1940 in Sydney collating manuscripts and published material, he went to Fiji to complete the task. A *New Fijian Dictionary* was published in Sydney in 1941. Dr Capell's Preface was written in Suva on the 18th February of that year. The Fijian-English section of the Dictionary occupies 342 pages. While in Fiji he became associated with a member of the Native Lands Commission, Fiji, R.H. Lester, and later co-operated with him in writing 'On Local Divisions and

Movements in Fiji', (*Oceania*, 1941), and on 'Kinship in Fiji' (*Oceania*, 1945-46).

After this Fijian interlude, Dr Capell returned in 1941 to continue his linguistic survey of North Australia, as mentioned above and spent 1942 and 1943 in Sydney writing up his material. In 1944 he filled a temporary vacancy in the Department of Anthropology as acting-lecturer, and in 1945 was appointed lecturer to fill a new position established by the Senate. In 1949 he was made Reader in Oceanic Languages in the same Department. During 1944 and 1945, however, in the absence of the lecturer responsible for Anthropology I, Dr Capell conducted the course very efficiently. His teaching ability and experience together with field-work and wide anthropological reading stood him in good stead. After this he was able to confine himself to lectures and seminars in linguistics, and of course research and writing. To this he added field surveys in Papua and New Guinea, Melanesia and Micronesia and also further field-work in north-central and northern Australia. Results have been recorded in *Oceania* and other Journals, in one book, *A Linguistic Survey of the South-Western Pacific* (1954) prepared for the South Pacific Commission, and in three *Oceania Linguistic Monographs; A New Approach to Australian Linguistics* (1956, 1962), *Anthropology and Linguistics of Futuna-Aniwa, New Hebrides*, 1958, *Some Linguistic Types in Australia*, 1962, and *Grammar of the Language of Sonsoral-Tobi, and Vocabulary*, 1969.<sup>1</sup>

In 1945 Dr Capell accepted my invitation to be an assistant Editor of *Oceania*. Since then he has handled all the linguistic material that has been offered to the Journal. Indeed, much of it has come because of his association with *Oceania*. In addition he has accepted the main burden of reviewing books in languages other than English and French.

## 2. LINGUISTICS IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS

During his twenty-four years in this Department, Dr Capell gave lectures on linguistics in the Anthropology courses and guided post-graduate students in linguistic research. For many years, too, he conducted special classes for persons doing Anthropology in preparation for missionary work, in many cases instructing them in the languages of the particular peoples amongst whom they planned to work.

Further, he believed that linguistics should not be just an ancillary subject in Anthropology courses, but should become a recognized course, and indeed a sequence of courses, in the Faculty of Arts. As a result of his vision and persistence, a one year course was recognized by the Faculty, and came into operation in 1954. In this venture he was assisted by the Professor of Greek, G.P. Shipp

(Comparative Philology), while he was responsible for General Linguistics. To assist students, he prepared roneoed notes which were issued in Monograph form in 1963 under the title *A Note Book of General Linguistics* and reissued in 1966 as *Beginning Linguistics*.

In 1960 Linguistics II was added. It was conducted by the same two scholars, Professor Shipp until 1966 and Dr Capell until 1968, in each case for a year after retirement. In the latter year, the number of students had risen to 55 and 16 in Courses I and II respectively.<sup>2</sup> At the time of his retirement Course I covered Analysis of Language in General; Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Comparative Linguistics and Semantics. Course II included Area Studies, Dialect and Standard Languages, Historical Linguistics and the History of Linguistics. The time will come when a separate Department of Linguistics will be established, with its own Professor and staff. The foundations were laid and secured by Arthur Capell.

In recent years, students seeking to graduate with an Honours B.A. in Anthropology, could choose to take linguistics as their special Distinction work throughout the four years of the Honours School. But ever since the Department was founded in 1926, Linguistics was one of the three subjects (called *schools* at the time), in which graduates in Anthropology could proceed to the M.A., both pass and honours.

During Capell's period in the Department, his section was a centre for Australian and Melanesian linguistics. Material came to him from many quarters (including S.H. Ray's papers), and (1) academic, (2) missionary and (3) *spare-time* linguists consulted with him. Amongst them have been (1) G.V. Milner and K. Hale, G.W. Grace, J. Mager and N.M. Holmer; (2) E. Worms, P. Drabbe, B. Baldwin, F. Middelkoop, H.A. Brown and E.J. Hughes; and (3) W.E. Smythe (physician) and H.K.J. Cowan (administrator). There are others whose names will be known through their works. Numbers of these have been, and are associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a branch of which was established and held its first school at a centre near Melbourne in 1951. This step was taken through the initiative of Professor Kenneth Pike of Michigan University and of the Wycliffe Bible Translators. Further, Professor Pike arranged with me that University graduate students who became associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, should come to the University of Sydney to take the M.A. in linguistics in the Department of Anthropology, doing the anthropology courses required by the University By-laws, if they had not done so as undergraduates. Several took their higher degrees in accordance with this scheme, and some at other Universities, basing their theses on linguistic field-work.<sup>3</sup> Their specialist lecturer and tutor was of course, Dr Capell, who has collaborated with the field

staff and field research workers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics ever since it began activities in Australia in 1951 and later established branches in the Philippines and in New Guinea. Some of its workers who were not graduates, have also contributed important linguistic results on the basis of S.I.L. training followed by field work. One of these is W.H. Douglas, whose *An Introduction to the Western Desert Language of Australia* (1959) was No. 4 in the Oceania Linguistic Monograph Series.<sup>4</sup>

Before passing on to some other aspects of Dr Capell's career, I should refer to three linguists with whom he has been especially associated. The first is Dr Stephen Wurm, whose coming to Australia in June 1954, from Vienna and London I was able to effect through a timely post-graduate Research Fellowship bequest (the A.E. and F.A.Q. Stephens) and the co-operation of the Vice-Chancellor. He and Dr Capell, who had previously corresponded, became close collaborators. In 1956 they persuaded me to establish a series of Linguistic Monographs with themselves as Editors. This valuable series is still running, even though Dr Wurm went to the Australian National University in 1957, where he is now Professor of Linguistics, and Dr Capell has retired but fortunately remains in Sydney.

The second is Geoffrey N. O'Grady. After corresponding with me from a pastoral station in north-western Australia about his amateur study of the local language Nyungamada, he came to Sydney, took up the formal study of linguistics with Dr Capell, became his Research Assistant, and eventually proceeded to a research B.A. 1959. Since those days he has gone on to a Ph.D. (Indiana) and to an Associate Professorship at Victoria University, British Columbia. *Nyangumata Grammar* 'Oceania Linguistic Monographs' No. 9, 1964, is one result of his work.

The third is Harold Coate, a gifted amateur. Meeting him during field-work in the Kimberleys in 1938-39, Dr Capell was very impressed by his knowledge of some of the local languages. He therefore suggested I might obtain a grant to enable Coate to visit Wandjina galleries with local Aborigines and record myths of the paintings in their languages. Mr Coate did this in 1945 and 1946, and after about seventeen years of non-linguistic work, mainly in New Guinea, he returned to the region in 1964 under a grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. He has now (1969), under Dr Capell's guidance, completed a very good grammar and an extensive dictionary of Ungarinyin (Ngarinyin).<sup>5</sup> Thus, after forty years, my need of 1928 has been met. In addition Mr Coate has recorded and translated a great amount of textual material on the mythology and social life of the Ungarinyin and neighbouring tribes, which is being prepared for publication.

### 3. ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION AND INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVITIES

During his long career of linguistic research, Capell has faced up to the new approaches and new theories which have been developed; glotto-chronology, lexico-statistics, structure statistics, glossematics, tagmemic analysis, transformational grammar, and the views of such theorists as Whorf and Bloomfield. This is shown in the course of his publications as the years have passed by.<sup>6</sup>

To me, his most interesting and indeed exciting contribution has been his comparative study of the structure and vocabulary of Aboriginal languages which enabled him to posit an early 'Common Australian'. This may or may not have been 'Original Australian', but it does provide an explanation of the homogeneous nature of Australian Languages. This has been presented in his *New Approach to Australian Linguistics* and in the introduction to *Some Linguistic Types in Australia*.

Dr Capell's bibliography shows that he has been concerned with linguistics over a wider region than Australia and the south-western Pacific, and also that he has made contributions in the overlapping fields of linguistics on the one hand and of social and cultural anthropology on the other hand: as examples, there are his 'Bantu and North Australian: A Study in Agglutination' (1951); 'Mythology in the Northern Kimberleys, N.W. Australia' (1939); 'The Future of Education in Papua' (1945); 'The Concept of Ownership in the Languages of Australia and the Pacific' (1949); 'Language and World View in the Northern Kimberleys, Western Australia' (1960); 'The Wandarang and Other Tribal Myths of the Yabuduruwa Ritual' (1960); and 'Inter-disciplinary Research on Polynesian Origins' (1962).

During the years, Dr Capell has played his part in societies relevant to anthropology and linguistics. He has held positions since 1942 in the Anthropological Society of New South Wales, 25 years on the Council, six years as President, eleven as Vice-President, and over twenty years on the Editorial Committee of the Society's Journal, *Mankind*, one year as Editor. He was a member of the Australian Institute of Sociology which functioned for a period, to meet a need arising out of the second World War situation. He was President for a term. He always took a lively interest in the Anthropology Section of the Australian & New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, attending many meetings and giving papers. He was Vice-President of the Section at the Jubilee Congress of 1962 and arranged the linguistic programme.

Dr Capell has also been a member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies since its inception following a Conference in 1961, serving as Convenor of its linguistic panel for several years and

since then as a member. In this capacity he prepared for the Institute a *Linguistic Survey of Australia* (1963), a practical guide for linguistic field-workers.

Internationally, Dr Capell is on the editorial board of *La Monda Lingvo Problemo*, an international interdisciplinary journal for the study of the language problem in all its aspects. He has been for many years an esteemed contributor to the principal Journals which are devoted to, or include, linguistics (English, American and European), and has been included in the Australian team of delegates to the Pacific Science Congresses at Bangkok (1957) and Honolulu (1961).

#### 4. IN THE FULNESS OF RETIREMENT

Dr Capell has led a very full life: lecturing and giving addresses on linguistic and cognate subjects; maintaining close contact with linguists and with missionary scholars by correspondence as well as in personal meetings; doing field-work at every opportunity, at his own expense if grants were not forthcoming; but they often were, as from the Australian National Research Council, the University of Sydney, the Administration of Papua and New Guinea and the United States of American Co-ordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology;<sup>7</sup> writing monographs and articles; editing and reviewing; and playing a part in anthropological and linguistic societies. He has seen our knowledge of, and research in, Australian and south-western Pacific linguistics grow in a degree that we would hardly have thought possible forty or even thirty years ago. Now, however, thanks to the example set by himself and to the foundation work done by him almost alone in University circles until a dozen or so years ago, we can be sure that other Universities besides Sydney and the Australian National University will recognize the importance and indeed the duty of establishing Departments of Linguistics. One function of these will be to widen and deepen our knowledge of the babel of languages which are still spoken in our region.

In his retirement, Dr Capell is producing articles and monographs; he is assisting with editorial work; he lectures on linguistics, including Melanesian Pidgin, at the Australian School of Pacific Administration; and he responds to all invitations to give of his specialist knowledge and life's learning.

Moreover, he lives near to me and so our friendship and our close association and mutual understanding in work begun in 1932, built up in the Department of Anthropology, and enriched in the field, goes on unabated. Though retired, we both press on.

## N O T E S

1. See also his earlier articles on 'Languages in the Central Highlands, New Guinea' (*Oceania*, Vol. XIX, 1948-49) and 'Languages of the Bogia District, New Guinea' (*Oceania*, Vol. XXII, 1951-52).
2. These courses are now conducted by D.S. Walsh, lecturer in Anthropological Linguistics, Department of Anthropology, and B.J. Blake of the Department of English.
3. Amongst these are Lynette F. Oates (*A Tentative Description of the Gunwinggu Language*, 1964, 'Oceania Linguistic Monographs, No. 10); Judith Short (research in Groote Eylandt); Alan and Phyllis Healey (*Studies in Philippine Linguistics*, 1961, 'Oceania Linguistic Monographs, No. 3) and Harland Kerr (research in New Guinea Southern Highlands).
4. In this the author acknowledges the training and help given him by Dr Capell. A second monograph by Mr Douglas, *The Aboriginal Languages of the South-west of Australia*, was published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, as No. 4 in its Linguistic Series.
5. In the final preparation of this grammar Mr Coate was helped by Mrs L. Oates. The dictionary consists of about 4000 root forms together with a 'description of the grammatical features involved in their use and of their combinations in phrases and idioms'.
6. His contributions in *Current Anthropology* are a good illustration. See also, 'The Techniques of Structure Statistics', *Oceania*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, 1962, pp. 1-11.
7. The Papua and New Guinea grants (December 1948 to March 1949 and January to March 1950) were made through the Department of Education for a survey of language in relation to native education. The work in Micronesia (December 1947 to March 1948) was done as a member (the only non-American) of an American research team whose objective was to lay scientific foundations for American administration in the region.