



Searching for Aboriginal Languages: Memoirs of a Field Worker

R. M. W. Dixon

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In 1963 R. M. W. (Bob) Dixon set off for Australia, where he was to record, chart, and preserve several of the complex and nearly extinct Aboriginal languages. Beginning with his introduction to these languages while a graduate student at the University of Edinburgh and his difficulties in getting to the Australian bush, Dixon's fourteen-year tale is one of frustration and enlightenment, of setbacks and discoveries.

As he made his way through northern Australia, Dixon was dependent on rumors of Aboriginal speakers, the unreliable advice of white Australians, and the faulty memories of many of the remaining speakers of the languages. Suggestions of informants led him on a circuitous trail through the bush, to speakers such as the singer Willie Kelly in Ravenshoe, who wanted his recordings sent to the south, "where white people would pay big money to hear a genuine Aborigine sing" and Chloe Grant in Murray Upper, who told tales in four dialects of digging wild yams, of the blue-tongue lizard Banggara, and of the arrival of Captain Cook. Dixon tells of obtaining the trust of possible informants, of learning the customs and terrain of the country, and of growing understanding of the culture and tradition of his subjects. And he explains his surprise at his most unexpected discovery: that the rich oral tradition of the "primitive" Aborigines could yield a history of a people, as told by that people, that dates to almost ten millenia before.

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