

Dear reader,

The following article is recommended as background reading for those intending to use the Children's Story, *From Berlin to Encounter Bay: The story of Friederike Meyer* from the "Reconciliation Sunday Worship Resources for 2011" on the Covenanting website: <http://mrn.sa.uca.org.au/covenanting/reconciliation-sunday.html>  
Our thanks to Dr Mary-Anne Gale for permission to use this article.

## **THE STORY OF FRIEDERIKE WILHELMINE MEYER (nee STERNICKE)**

From 1840 to 1848 Mrs Meyer lived at Encounter Bay as the wife of the Lutheran missionary Heinrich August Eduard Meyer, assisting in his task of ministering to the local Aboriginal people of the Ramindjeri group. So why was Mrs Meyer's story special, and why are we telling her story rather than that of her husband Heinrich Meyer?

The reason is because there is much to be learnt from Mrs Meyer and her story. We can learn of her unconditional love and devotion which she showed towards the Ramindjeri people with whom she chose to live alongside, on the other side of the world, a long way from her family and friends in Berlin, Germany (then Prussia). It wasn't what she achieved in her time at Encounter Bay that is her legacy, but the story of the way she conducted herself, and the love she showed towards the local Aboriginal people with whom she devoted many years of her life. Long after her leaving the mission field in Encounter Bay, she was remembered fondly, and the Encounter Bay people continued to visit her in her home in Hahndorf, well after the death of her beloved husband. Indeed, in the instructions given to Heinrich's wife Friederike, by the director of the Dresden Missionary Society (who sent them to Encounter Bay), it was stated: "rest assured that she who works in the background with an unwavering heart and a quiet gentle manner is precious in God's sight, and that the conduct of women is able to win many a soul without a spoken word." (see Meyer Letters -3<sup>rd</sup> March 1840 Instructions to Meyer)

We must remember that the very early experience for many Aboriginal people, in their contact with white people, was with rough and uncouth whalers and sealers. According to Meyer himself (in a letter 12<sup>th</sup> August 1840), on the arrival of Mrs Meyer in Adelaide, she was greeted warmly by the local Aboriginal people: "great was their joy at this, especially the women, who could not stop gazing at my wife and did not know how best to demonstrate their pleasure."

Just before the arrival of Friederike and Heinrich in Adelaide, the murder of the survivors of the *Maria* shipwreck at Lacepede Bay, south of Adelaide, instilled fear in the mind of some. Concerns for Mrs Meyer's safety in moving to live with the Aboriginal people of Encounter Bay were given a firm response by Friederike: "My faith and trust in God has enable me to overcome all fears and apprehensions as regards my safety at Encounter Bay." (Brauer, 1985 p 161).

For much of the long sea trip from Germany to Adelaide, Mrs Meyer suffered sea sickness (maybe in part because she soon fell pregnant and was expecting their first baby). So on arrival in Adelaide in South Australia, she chose to travel overland to Encounter Bay, rather than climb aboard yet another rolling ship. But this proved to be a disastrous decision, especially when they became lost in the scrub past Willunga,

and it began to pour with rain. She soon began to slip and slide in the thick mud as she travelled by foot towards her new home in Encounter Bay. The pony they purchased in Adelaide, to pull their cart, laden with their possessions, proved completely useless. They soon realised they had been conned into buying “the worst horse that was to be had in the colonies”, as it refused to pull their cart, and once untethered, quickly bolted away, never to be seen again. Meyer writes: “On several occasions I watched my poor wife, whose strength was at an end, tumble down the steep slopes, without being able to offer her the least assistance because I was laden with our necessities...” (see Meyer Letters 11<sup>th</sup> December 1840).

On arrival in Encounter Bay, there was little to be excited about. Although Mrs Meyer would have appreciated the beauty of the little bay where they were to live for the next eight years, their accommodation left much to be desired. Friederike was accustomed to the life of a lady-in-waiting, as she had previously worked in a palace attending to a princess in Berlin, before marrying her husband. According to Brauer (1985, p159), Friederike had served for eleven years in the palace (schloss) of Prince Charles and Princess Maria of Prussia, which was a place of extreme extravagance and elegance. Yet it was with complete dedication that Friederike adjusted to her first home in Australia, which was a mere slab hut with bare walls, and with no glass in the windows. But Heinrich remarks: “We were nevertheless truly happy to have a roof over our heads.” (see Meyer Letter 11<sup>th</sup> December 1840). It wasn't until March 1844 that the couple moved into a stone cottage with windows, and enjoyed some reasonable homely comforts (see Meyer Letter 10<sup>th</sup> April 1844).

Below is a dot point overview of Friederike's life and mission to the Aborigines of South Australia:

- Friederike Wilhelmine Sternicke married HAE Meyer on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1840, with the blessing of the Dresden Mission Society.
- The Dresden Mission handed instructions to Meyer before their marriage, stating: “You have our full approval of your marriage to Friederike Wilhelmine Sternicke of Berlin, your espoused bride. May the richest blessing of God be with you both. (Brauer, 1985, p160)
- Friederike and Heinrich Meyer sailed for Adelaide, via London in England, on the *Caleb Angas*, setting sail on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1840. They arrived in Port Adelaide on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1840.
- The Meyers based themselves at Encounter Bay for eight years, learning the local Ramindjeri/Ngarrindjeri language, with Heinrich travelling between the two main camps of Aboriginal people at the Bluff and Port Elliot, plus the large camp at Kent Reserve during the whaling season.
- The Meyers eventually had a stone home built for themselves, plus a school house, which was opened in 1844, and served as a boarding school, schoolroom and meeting place for Sunday services.
- H.A.E. Meyer learnt the language and published the book in 1843:

*Vocabulary of the language spoken by the Aborigines of the southern and eastern portions of the settled districts of South Australia, viz., by the tribes in the vicinity of Encounter Bay, and (with slight variations) by those extending along the coast to the eastward around Lake Alexandrina and for some distance up the River Murray preceded by a Grammar showing the construction of the language as far as at present known.*

- Mrs Meyer was a devoted wife and mother, and gave birth to six children, but sadly lost three of these at a young age. Her first son was born in 1843 at Encounter Bay, and sadly died three days later. Her second son was born a year later, but sadly died a few years later in Bethany, after they had left Encounter Bay. Their third girl was born in 1846 at Encounter Bay, but only survived for a short time, while their second little girl was lucky to survive her dress catching on fire, which must have been a very frightening experience with little medical assistance available.
- They had three children who survived, and went on to have children of their own. Many of their descendants living today tell the Meyer story. Loise Auguste Sophia Meyer was the first born in 1840, and married a Leibel, and her descendants include the Hoff descendants. Charlotte Friederika Maria Meyer was the second born in 1841, and married a Pastor Stempel. The only surviving son Gotthilf Carl August Meyer was the last born, in 1850 in Bethany, and went on to have six children.
- The Meyers struggled financially to support their mission work, and the newly established mission school, and often found themselves going hungry. When their cat caught a bird, Mrs Meyer was often forced to pounce on the cat and retrieve the bird for themselves – which they plucked and ate for dinner, thus providing a much desired feed of meat and protein for the little family. (see Meyer Letters 7<sup>th</sup> October 1845)
- Eventually, the Meyers were forced to take on a transport business, carting goods to and from Adelaide and Encounter Bay, by bullock dray, just to maintain the mission and to meet their own growing family expenses.
- Eventually Heinrich Meyer was offered a place as the Pastor with the Lutheran parish in Bethany and Hoffnungsthal in the Barossa Valley, and reluctantly left the mission behind in 1848. He also served as president of the Bethany-Lobethal Synod until 1861.
- Suddenly at the age of 49 Heinrich Meyer died of a stroke in his sleep, at Bethany, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1862, leaving Friederike as a widow.

According to Brauer (1985 p167), when Friederike and Heinrich Meyer departed from Encounter Bay, the local Aboriginal people were very distressed to see them leave: “all of the natives broke out into a loud and long wail of lamentation.” The Aboriginal people became very attached to the Meyers, and their little family, during the eight years they devoted to the mission. And this affection continued on for many years, particularly towards Mrs Meyer, after the early passing of her husband. Apparently they visited her for 26 years after the death of Heinrich. Friederike was living with her

daughters in Hahndorf and Littlehampton, and every year in May the Aboriginal people who knew her would call in on their way to Adelaide (on route to the regular Queens Birthday celebrations where blankets were distributed annually):

“When Mrs Meyer appeared, they were all smiles; and as she walked along the rows where they had taken their places in sitting posture and spoke to each one of them, they bowed down and literally kissed the ground where she had stood.” (Brauer (1985 p 169)

On Friederike’s death in December 1889, according to Brauer (1985 p 170):

“their mourning knew no bounds, and they begged to be shown her grave... At the graveside they wept bitterly for the “good Mother” whom they could no longer see.”

However, the Encounter Bay people continued to visit the daughter Mary, who had married Pastor Stempel. But on Mary’s early death, they were again distressed to lose a close friend. They lamented: “Mother Meyer dead; Mary Meyer dead; come no more”. (Brauer, 1985 p 170)

And according to Brauer, they did no longer come.... They had lost their very special female friends forever.

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Prepared by Mary-Anne Gale, March 2011

### References:

A Brauer (1985) *Under the Southern Cross: history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia*. Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide

Lois Zweck et al (in press) *The Meyer Letters*. [An English translation of Meyers letters to Germany, to be published by Wakefield Press]

### Dr Mary-Anne Gale: Linguist – University of Adelaide



Mary-Anne grew up on a farm near Victor Harbor in Ngarrindjeri country. She now works with the Ngarrindjeri community in reviving their beautiful language. Since training as a teacher and linguist, Mary-Anne has worked in bilingual schools in the Northern Territory at Milingimbi and Yirrkala (in Yolngu country) and at Willowra in Warlpiri country. She has also worked with Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte students in the Anangu Teacher Education Program. Mary-Anne enjoys collaborating with Aboriginal people in making books, especially books in Aboriginal languages, such as big dictionaries for adults, plus picture dictionaries and alphabet books for younger students. She also enjoys

helping adults write their life stories, and so far has worked with Uncle Lewis O'Brien on *The Clock Struck Thirteen* and with the late Veronica Brodie on *My Side of the Bridge*. Mary-Anne also specialises in writing language curriculum, and has just completed writing a Cert IV to be offered through TAFE SA called Learning and Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language. This is very exciting as Aboriginal adults can now learn more about their own language through a TAFE course in SA as well as qualify to teach their language to others.