David Unaipon

Born in 1872 at the Point McLeay Mission on the Lower Murray in South Australia, David Unaipon would become a great inventor, an Indigenous rights advocate and Australia's first published Aboriginal writer.

Unaipon's fascination for science was kindled under the teaching of Mr. W. Hutley. Unaipon went on to develop many inventions including an improved hand-piece for sheep-shearing which was patented in 1909 with the help of Herbert Basedow, a former South Australian Protector of Aborigines. The two exchanged many letters which are now held in the Mitchell Library.

About this item:
Herbert Basedow - Papers, 1856-1932, 1941; with incidental papers of Professor Ralph Tate, 1879-1899

Transcript:
Adelaide
April 21 1914

Dr H. Basedow
City Chambers

Sir

I am an Australian aboriginal belong to the lower Murray and Lake Alexandria known as the Narringeri tribe: Born on the Point McLeay Mission Station.

The peculiarity of my birth was that being born between two great forces; Heathenism and Civilisation. I was educated under the teaching of Mr W. Hutley. I remember well some of the lessons he gave: This in particular, We are living in a wonderful age in which the world has made a wonderful progress in Commerce Science and Art what wonderful discoveries and inventions.

But he went on to say there are three things that have baffled science up to the present. The Elixir of Life the Philosopher's Stone and Perpetual Motion. He told us about the many attempts made to bring
about perpetual motion but have failed. That has made a great impression upon my mind gave me an ambition to rise: I have experimented with gravation to try and bring about perpetual motion with the result I invented the lateral motion applied to sheep shearing machine. I am struggling for an independent living I want some gentleman who will help me through with my machine by advancing me £25.00 (twenty five pound) and I will give him one third interest when machine sold. I have an offer already for the sheep shearing machine providing I standardize it which I have already done. I want money to get back to Melbourne: I may state here that

Letter from David Unaipon to Dr Herbert Basedow, 21 April 1914, page 6 1914
David Unaipon
Call # MLMSS 161 [2]
Digital ID: FL3151041
View collection item detail [5]

About this item:
Herbert Basedow - Papers, 1856-1932, 1941; with incidental papers of Professor Ralph Tate, 1879-1899

Transcript:
I have had my invention patented for the Commonwheat:

Improved Mechanic Motion Device

It can be indifinetly applied to other [part?] in machinery.

I am

Yours truly
David Unaipon

Letter from David Unaipon to Dr Herbert Basedow, 21 April 1914, page 7 1914
David Unaipon
Call # MLMSS 161 [2]
Digital ID: FL3151043
View collection item detail [7]

About this item:
Herbert Basedow - Papers, 1856-1932, 1941; with incidental papers of Professor Ralph Tate, 1879-1899

Transcript:
South Australia
MEMORANDUM
May 30th 1914

From
CHIEF PROTECTOR ABORIGINALS,
ADELAIDE
(TELEPHONE No. 774)

To
Mr David Unaipon
Adelaide

The Hon. Commissioneer of Public Works has approved of the sum of five pounds (£5) being given to you towards applying your patent to shearing machines on condition that you raise the balance.

Yours faithfully

NG South C.P.A.

This will be paid you on or about 10th June next.
NGS

Please deliver this sum of five pounds (£5.00) to Dr Basedow when it falls due to me.
June 7, 1914
David Unaipon

"Born between two great forces; Heathenism and Civilisation," Unaipon was influenced at a young age by the teachings of the Congregationalist church and was also aware of his Aboriginal spiritual ancestry. In trying to fuse these two halves, he became a great protagonist for Aboriginal affairs, and undertook wherever he travelled to preach and educate.

During 1924 - 1925, he journeyed through southern Australia compiling what became *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*. The manuscript was submitted for publication but Unaipon was not to be credited for it yet. Instead the book was sold to William Ramsay Smith, an anthropologist who edited the work slightly and published it under his own name in 1930 with the title *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*. The book was finally published in Unaipon's name, using his original title, in 2001. His original manuscript survives to this day in the Mitchell Library collection.

His extraordinary lifetime of achievements was formally recognised in 1953 when he was awarded the Coronation Medal. He died on 7 February 1967 and in 1985 was posthumously awarded the FAW Patricia Weickhardt Award.
for Aboriginal writers. He was further honoured in 1988 with the establishment of the annual national David Unaipon Award for unpublished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, and an annual Unaipon Lecture in Adelaide. Finally, in 1995 he was immortalised on our $50 note!

Volume 1: Manuscript of 'Legendary Tales of Australian Aborigines', 1924-1925

Sponsors

This story has been developed with the support of the State Library of NSW Foundation.

We would like to acknowledge the generosity of Rio Tinto and the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation.


Links