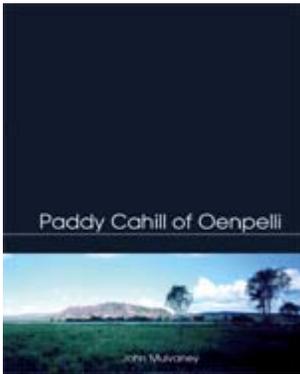


Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli by John Mulvaney. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004, pp. xvi + 216, A\$45.00, paperback, ISBN: 0 85575 456 7.



Paddy Cahill was one of the iconic, jack-of-all-trades frontiersmen who settled Australia's top end in the 1880s. Born in Queensland in 1862 he joined a cattle drive to the Northern Territory in 1883 and worked as a buffalo shooter, town butcher and prospector before settling at Oenpelli on the East Alligator River in 1909. He established friendly relations with the local Aboriginal community and tried his hand at growing a number of crops with the usual NT lack of success. In 1912 he met Walter Baldwin Spencer, professor of biology at Melbourne University and writer of a number of books on the Aboriginal tribes of central and northern Australia.

On Spencer's recommendation, Cahill was appointed Protector of Aborigines in August 1912. This position involved counting the number of Aboriginal people in the local community, keeping the peace, issuing rations, maintaining the community's health and writing an annual report. The recommendation was the beginning of a long friendship between the two men, a friendship that lasted until Cahill's death in 1923. Although Cahill was a self-educated, rough bushman with a certain flair for telling stories, he was also a humanitarian who was interested in Australian Aboriginal society and who genuinely tried to improve Aboriginal welfare on Oenpelli station. He became one of a number of frontiersmen Spencer befriended in his attempts to document traditional Aboriginal society at a time when it was believed to be headed for extinction.

Mulvaney's original intention with this book was to publish the twenty-four letters Cahill wrote to Spencer between 1913 and 1921. However, the work grew into a short biography of this little-known character whose life story reveals much about early white settlement in Australia's northern frontier. The book is divided into two sections. The first part covers Paddy Cahill's life in the NT and the second part reprints Cahill's twenty-four letters to Baldwin Spencer. Also included as appendices are two articles written by Cahill for the media (one on life as a NT buffalo shooter, written in 1899 and one on an expedition to Point Farewell on the mouth of the East Alligator River, written in 1901); three letters to Spencer by Joe Cooper, another buffalo hunter; and a series of photographs of Cahill and Oenpelli station.

Meticulously documented, Mulvaney's book not only draws on personal letters, official reports, newspaper and magazine articles to flesh out Cahill's life and times, but it is also liberally sprinkled with maps and tables containing information that ranges from the price of buffalo hides to the types of diseases suffered by members of the Oenpelli Aboriginal community. The result is a book that should appeal to wide range of readers.

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