
NHARANGGA WARGUNNI BUGI-BUGGILLU



A JOURNEY THROUGH NARUNGGGA HISTORY

Skye Krichauff

for

Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association Inc.

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in association with

Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2011
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This book is an initiative of the NAPA board:
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Edited by Penelope Curtin
Cover designed by Liz Nicholson, designBITE
Typeset and designed by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press
Printed in China at Everbest Printing Co. Ltd

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Krichauff, Skye.
Title: Nharrungga wargunni bugi-buggillu = a journey through Narungga history/
Skye Krichauff for the Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 910 4 (hbk.).
Notes: Includes index.
Subjects: Narungga (Australian people) – South Australia – History.
Aboriginal Australians – South Australia – Yorke Peninsula – History.
Yorke Peninsula (S. Aust.) – History.

Other Authors/
Contributors: Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association.
Dewey Number: 994.235



The SA Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Body in partnership with Aboriginal Education and Employment Services, Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia, May 2010.

*This Narungga history is dedicated to
Narungga people both past and present,
to whom we pay our respect.*

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Foreword

This Narungga history is a testimony to the cultural strength and resilience of Narungga Nations people, past and present. The reader is taken on a unique journey and provided with a window into past relationships between Narungga, their country and European settlement on Yorke Peninsula. Narungga peoples' deep connection to a specific and unique country is described and evidence of traditional ownership is documented. The strength and pride of a people determine opportunity; the past provides a critical lens to the future. For Narungga people, acknowledgement of their past was (and is) critical to forging a pathway forward. This history provides historical documentation of a proud people and a rich culture. All people have the right to live and practice their cultural rights and historical traditions, and the right to be liberated from oppression. The reader is provided with a unique perspective of white dominance – of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed – and the hope and despair that emanates when people are placed in hierarchical positions of privilege and power. Evidence presented throughout also illustrates amicable arrangements between Narungga and European settlers. The book seeks to examine and gain insight into the relationships between

the two groups and to understand historical events that shaped the Narungga people's pathway into the future.

This history deserves a wide audience as many people contributed their memories, knowledge and time in support of this book. This book is significant because it is based on extensive research derived from documents contained within museums, libraries and individual Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families. The book also incorporates personal interpretations of the past. The information contained within this book provides a record of historical events that will be held safely for future generations, and affirms that Narungga people have survived.

Lesley Wanganeen, Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association

Acknowledgements

There are many people who deserve thanks for their generous and kind assistance during the researching and writing of this book. The Board of the Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association (NAPA) displayed foresight and vision by instigating the Narungga History Project. NAPA were a pleasure to work with and provided initial funding, technological equipment and permission to access and publish restricted archives and photographs. The South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Body in partnership with Aboriginal Education and Employment Services, Department of Education and Children's Services generously provided a publication grant. Lesley Wanganeen, Michael Wanganeen, Kevin O'Loughlin, Betty Fisher, Lewis O'Brien, Alan Murdock, Colin Goldsworthy, Murl Parsons, Doreen Kartinyeri, Rose Dixon and Phoebe Wanganeen shared their time and knowledge. John Poynter kindly lent his vegetation and pastoral lease maps and gave permission for them to appear in this book. Chester Schultz shared miscellaneous historic information, in particular Narungga place names. Jane Simpson provided translations of Narungga personal names. Philip Clarke helped with botanical information. Tom Gara passed on reference

numbers and information of relevant photos and archives held in the South Australian Museum Archives. Mandy Paul did likewise for paintings in the Mitchell Library. Lea Gardam, Tara Dodd and Ali Abdullah-Highfold located archives and artefacts held in the South Australian Museum. Narungga language teacher Tania Wanganeen provided the title *Nharrungga Wargunni Bugi-buggillu*.

This book is based on my Masters Thesis 'Narungga and Europeans: cross-cultural relations on Yorke Peninsula in the nineteenth century'. Staff and postgraduates in the History department of the University of Adelaide gave feedback on various presentations, and my supervisor Robert Foster provided particularly constructive advice. Once submitted, the Narungga History Reference Group read through my thesis, suggested changes and supported its publication. Klaus Neumann and Ian McShane from Swinburne University's Institute of Social Research have given poignant critiques of drafts. My family and friends have been interested and enthusiastic supporters throughout – thank you to all!

Skye Krichauff, 2010



Map of Yorke Peninsula showing key locations.

Introduction

I considered it almost useless to make any attempt at a friendly meeting with them ... but advancing a few yards towards them alone, while my party stood still, I made the signal of peace by holding up both my hands and waving a green bough. This caused them immediately to drop their spears, and one of them took a green bow also, and advanced to meet me ...

(James Hughes, *South Australian Register*, 26 December 1840)

James Hughes was a surveyor employed by both the South Australian Colonial Government and the Adelaide Survey Association. He is describing an encounter that occurred on the shores of Narungga country in October 1840, when he and his party of seven disembarked in the vicinity of what is now known as Port Victoria, on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. They were received by seventeen men with spears who yelled in a 'threatening attitude'. Having visited this country before, Hughes had already had several encounters with Narungga. On this occasion, Hughes gave the man who advanced to meet him some biscuits, which were subsequently distributed to his companions. The meeting proceeded amicably, and through signs the two groups organised to meet again, 'before the sun went down'. Later Hughes and his party would bring

biscuits and their hosts would lead them to water. As they separated, each party waved a green bough.

This book aims to shed light on a little-known chapter of Yorke Peninsula history: the interaction between Narungga (the Aboriginal people of the peninsula) and the European settlers in the nineteenth century. This book seeks to understand relations between the two groups and between individuals, and to make sense of unfolding events. How did Narungga view the pale visitors who travelled over the sea and helped themselves to water and game? And, later, how did they react to the permanent presence of pastoralists who took over the waterholes and prime hunting areas? By what means did colonists assert and justify their occupation of Narungga country?

To make sense of Narungga–settler relations it is necessary to understand the cultural and historical context of documented events and be open to the cross-cultural possibilities that abounded at this time. Similarly, a deeper appreciation of the incident on the beach requires knowledge of the extent and nature of previous encounters. These Narungga men were prepared to tolerate non-Aboriginal people who showed some familiarity with the greeting protocols that were widely recognised throughout Aboriginal Australia; an awareness of Hughes’s personality and motives and his (and Narungga) actions in unfolding events sheds additional light upon this encounter.

We know about this meeting because Hughes wrote an account of his visit which was published in an Adelaide newspaper, the *South Australian Register* (hereafter referred to as the *Register*). Details of early Aboriginal–settler encounters survive in sparse and fragmented forms, with the vast majority of historical records stemming predominately from Europeans. By closely examining a wide and diverse array of sources and applying an anthropological understanding of Aboriginal society to a reading of the records, it becomes possible to build up a deep and nuanced picture of nineteenth-century Narungga–settler relations. Drawing upon the work of linguists, geographers, archaeologists and ethno-botanists further aids the construction of a rich and detailed account of the past.

South Australian archives contain masses of information

about events that occurred on Yorke Peninsula during the earliest years of British occupation. From reports written to the Police Commissioner by policemen stationed on Yorke Peninsula and from correspondence between the Police Commissioner, the Protector of Aborigines, the Colonial Secretary and the Attorney General, the views of government officials are made explicit. Nineteenth-century newspapers provide snapshots of events and of public opinion and sentiment, while also containing detailed court reports from which it is occasionally possible to hear the words of Narungga themselves.

Oral histories provide another avenue for hearing from Narungga and learning of their enduring connections to country and the importance of kin. But oral histories concerning European settlement collected in the 1960s only go back as far as the 1880s, when the mission at Point Pearce was relatively well established. The colonial process severely disrupted Narungga society and most Narungga and non-Narungga living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have little knowledge of the early colonial years.

Paintings, photographs, sketches and artefacts provide an immediate and powerful means of knowing about the past – as do maps. When comparing old maps with new, it becomes possible to trace the various stages of European occupation. First comes the initial, embryonic phase, when wells and the huts built next to them are roughly marked. The tracks that link wells are Aboriginal tracks, which became well known to settlers. The huts later became stations, the stations became towns. The bitumen roads that we spin over so quickly and which take us from town to town are built over Narungga tracks. The Europeans' sketchy, tentative markings on early maps have now become fixed and are seemingly immutable – the colonising project has reached maturity.

Maps reveal place names. Place names can act as a reminder of past events and people long dead, but for many of the current generation, be they of Narungga or European descent, their meaning and significance are unknown. Many place names on Yorke Peninsula epitomise relations between Narungga and settlers in the nineteenth century, and names like Pentonvale, Weavers, Roger's Corner and Bagnell's Well are explicit memorials to the earliest settlers. This (re) naming according to British norms

illustrates a form of conquest and continuing domination. Other names such as Black Point, Black Bob's Road, Little Lizard, Black Hill, Minlaton (from Minlacowie) illustrate recognition of Aboriginal presence and perhaps a skewed form of cultural fusion, in which the British named and defined such places on their own terms and in their own tongue and thus asserted their authority. But throughout the peninsula, place names such as Bublacowie, Curramulka, Warooka, Coobowie, Tuckokcowie, Muloowurtie, Didyamulka and Wauraltee startle with their regularity and abundance, and allude to different influences and understandings. The adoption of Aboriginal place names can represent yet another form of appropriation but can equally indicate a time when Narungga and settlers not only communicated with each other, but when Narungga were acknowledged as an indisputable and continued presence. During this time newcomers deferred to, and even respected, Narungga knowledge and continued occupation.

On Yorke Peninsula today, the colonial and pre-colonial past seem beyond our reach. The vast and thick scrub that covered much of the peninsula is now confined to specific areas, such as small reserves and the Innes National Park. Many native animals, plentiful a century ago, are now extinct or rare. The flat inland country is extensively cropped and grazed. It appears uniform and bare, stripped of character. When comparing it with the country he grew up on eighty years ago, one old-time resident describes it as a 'lunar landscape'. But scattered stone ruins and the unexpected appearance of remnants of native vegetation serve as reminders of another era. The astute observer can detect old wells and waterholes: some still have water in them, some have been filled in, some are used as rubbish dumps. Farmers occasionally find hammer stones, glass scrapers and grinding stones in their paddocks. Local government councils and developers have to deal with the ethical and legal implications of unearthing human remains and building over burial sites. When you start digging, the past approaches the present.

To re-construct an image of Narungga-settler relations during the early colonial years, we need to imagine a world in which no fences existed, where there were no townships or shops, where dirt tracks connected waterholes and sites of plenty, and where

people travelled by foot or on horseback. In this world, life was tough. Things often taken for granted today, such as a constant supply of water and an unending and varied supply of food, were not assumed but were dependent upon the careful management of resources and human labour. People died of diseases that are a distant memory to many people living in the twenty-first century. For both Narungga and Europeans, physical punishment was not only acceptable, but was expected. In this world, Narungga were the undisputed custodians of their country and the Europeans were insecure, vulnerable visitors and, later, usurpers.

Knowing as we do now the detrimental outcome of British occupation for Aboriginal groups, it is hard to ignore today's realities – to put the long-term effects to one side and to open our minds to what might have been. For Narungga and Europeans living in this period, the future was unknown and uncertain, and stereotypical understandings of the other had not hardened or become anticipated fact. The early colonial years were a time of improvisation and flexibility. Group and individual actions were shaped by past experiences and the current situation. Even the Governor (and other senior officials) improvised as events unfolded, attempting to reconcile the humanitarian concerns emanating from London with settler ambitions and the economic survival of the fledgling colony. Looking back on the past is therefore both frustrating and inspiring – it enables us to speculate on a world that might have been and therefore opens up and offers us possibilities for the future.

Nharungga Wargunni Bugi-buggillu: A Journey Through Narungga History provides detailed accounts of the varied, complex and contingent relations which existed between members of the two cultural groups, neither of which should be understood as unified or homogenous. The Europeans comprised people from diverse geographic regions (such as England, Scotland, Ireland and some German states), who spoke various languages and dialects, who adhered to particular church denominations and belonged to distinct socioeconomic groups. The Narungga belonged to a specific and unique country. They had particular customs and characteristics which distinguished them from other Aboriginal groups. The vegetation, topography and geography of their country

shaped Narungga experiences of colonisation, which differed in significant ways from their neighbours the Kaurna and Nukunu, and from groups who lived elsewhere in Australia.

Just as it is vital to recognise diversity amongst Aboriginal groups and Europeans, it is equally important to recognise the role played by individuals, whose gender, previous experiences, personalities and circumstances shaped their actions. Neither Narungga nor settlers automatically behaved aggressively. Narungga were not necessarily opposed to the arrival of newcomers. They bided their time; they watched and they learnt, they were prepared to accommodate and incorporate new objects and people into existing systems. Soon, members of the two groups were communicating with and appearing to benefit from the presence of the other. How long did this tentative truce last and what caused it to end? How did intermediaries, both Narungga and European, influence and shape their group's experiences of colonisation?

The records indicate that the shootings and killings, which continued for decades in some areas, lasted only a few months on Yorke Peninsula (after which they were specific to one station) and that comparatively few Narungga lost their lives during violent encounters with Europeans, although it is possible that incidents of violence on the isolated 'toe-end' of the peninsula went unreported. Many Narungga died of introduced diseases. In the 1860s the government began dividing the land into eighty-acre blocks and selling it off for farming. The land was subsequently fenced and cleared, and by the late 1800s very few southern Narungga remained on their country.

Any reading and telling of the past is inevitably subjective. This account has been shaped by my own history (my culture, gender, personality, age, class and life experiences) and by my research strategies. In my re-imaginings of the past I have tried to uncover as much information as possible relating to nineteenth-century Narungga-settler interaction. I have made numerous trips to Yorke Peninsula in the company of both Narungga and settler descendants. On Narungga country I have looked for wells and sealers' huts. I have visited ancient flint 'factories', the ruins of stations, important Creation sites and local museums. I have tried to imagine myself back in that time at those places to understand

why events unfolded as they did – why did people make particular choices and how did they live with the consequences of their actions? I have tried to empathise with the diverse range of people who inhabited Yorke Peninsula in the nineteenth century. I hope this account treats Narungga and settlers with respect, and restores to Narungga their humanity and dignity.

The stories, the histories, contained in this book are virtually unknown today. Their outlines sit boxed and filed, microfilmed and safely stored in South Australian archives. Some of the outlines are bold and distinct, others are faint and difficult to decipher. Details about people, places, times and seasons flesh out the outlines, and many of these details I located through extensive searching and in unusual, out-of-the way places. To provide colour and tone to the emerging picture, I seized on and interpreted clues and used conjecture and imagination. By such means I have tried to illustrate the vibrancy and complexity of the past.

This book aims to honour those Narungga who witnessed the takeover of their country, who watched as their people were decimated and the life they knew was destroyed. To do justice to these people it is important to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account which does not ignore uncomfortable, unsettling or contradictory facts. Thus the stories told in this book provide evidence of tolerance and cruelty, hope and injustice, humanity and indifference.

Note

'Indigenous' is currently accepted by scholars as the appropriate term for describing the original inhabitants of Australia and their descendants. However, Narungga I have been working with feel this is a non-specific, global term and prefer 'Aboriginal', which they identify as being exclusively Australian. The term 'Aboriginal' is therefore used throughout this book.

The term 'Narungga' first became recognised by non-Aboriginal people as the most appropriate term to refer to the Aboriginal people of Yorke Peninsula in the late 1800s–early 1900s. In September 1899 Frank Gillen was told by 'the blacks' that their tribal name was 'Narung-ga'. Europeans previously referred to these people as the 'Yorke Peninsula', 'Turra' or 'Adjadurah' Tribe. See D.J. Mulvaney, H. Morphy and A. Petch [eds], *My Dear Spencer: The letters of F.J. Gillen to Baldwin Spencer*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 262–3, 266, 434.

Chapter 1

Foreshadowings: 1802–1836

This is a history of the Narungga people of Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, whose country encompasses the whole peninsula from the mouth of the Broughton River on the eastern shores of Spencer Gulf, to Port Wakefield at the head of Gulf St Vincent, and the surrounding waters and islands. Narungga have inhabited this land for countless generations. One Narungga Creation Story describes low-lying, swampy country covered with numerous lagoons. Disagreements amongst Ancestral Beings belonging to the bird, animal and reptile families caused great concern to leaders of the willy wagtail, emu and kangaroo families. After the families experienced a night of prophetic dreams, a giant kangaroo bone was found which proved to be magic. When the wise and respected kangaroo pointed the bone at the swampy land, the earth opened up and the sea gradually flooded the low land. This is how the two peninsulas (Yorke and Eyre) and (what we now call) Spencer Gulf were formed.¹ The events described in this Creation Story are consistent with rising sea levels and the drowning of land, which scientists estimate occurred between 15,000 and 8000 years ago.²

Narungga believe that the actions of Ancestral Beings created the features and characteristics of the land we see today. The two gulfs, the Hummock Ranges, hills and elevations, boulders, wells,

springs, native animals and various plants and trees throughout the peninsula provide a constant physical reminder of the exploits of these Beings and the laws which originated as a result of their actions. These laws are reiterated through Creation Stories, which prescribe strict and complex obligations that must be upheld if harmonious social and environmental relations are to prevail. Celebrations, or ‘corroborees’, relive the actions of Ancestral Beings through song, drama, dance and poetry and reinforce the people’s connection to their land.

To belong to the land is to have intimate and detailed knowledge of the surrounding environment and to ensure that ceremonies are performed which acknowledge, reinforce and celebrate the mutual dependence and interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants and land. Unlike Europeans, who often see land as an object to be exploited – a source of economic wealth – Aboriginal people perceive their Country as alive, as a Being which works in partnership with its people by protecting and providing for them, receiving care and attention in return.³ Narungga showed their respect and deep regard for their environment by singing for Country, performing rituals for Country, introducing strangers to Country, and crying for Country that had been neglected or ‘orphaned’ because its owners had been displaced or had died. Through knowledge passed down through the generations, they knew exactly when, where and how to find food and water, the meaning and significance of different places, and which ceremonies needed to be performed where, when and by whom. They knew how to behave in certain areas and where access was restricted or forbidden. This connection between people and their territory was reciprocal and generous – when people abided by the law, their country nourished and protected them. Country provided Narungga with physical, spiritual and emotional security and confidence.

Prior to European colonisation, Narungga were divided into four ‘clan’ or ‘totem’ groups – the *Kari* (Emu), *Wauwi* (Red Kangaroo), *Wilthuthu* (Shark) and *Wiltu* (Eaglehawk).⁴ Narungga termed these groups, which were inherited from their parents, *parū*.⁵ Westerners use the term ‘totem’ to describe ‘structured relationships between human groups and “natural” species’.⁶ Anthropologist

Deborah Bird Rose points out that totems are concerned with connection, and that relationships between people and their totems are profound and enduring:

These connections between humans and animal and plant species, or with other parts of the natural world, overlap and crosscut each other. Not only is every person in connection totemically, but equally important they are in connection with numerous species. The different ways of being connected produce for each person a web of kinship with the natural world.⁷

For example, Narungga of the emu totem were connected to each other, to Emu people of other Aboriginal groups, to emus and to sites of emu significance. Curramulka, or *Garrdimalga*, situated in the south of the peninsula is one such site. *Garrdimalga* translates literally as ‘emu white’, meaning a limestone waterhole where emus come to drink.⁸ Stories connected with this waterhole were ‘owned’ by members of the emu ‘clan’ who were its custodians.

The peninsula was territorially divided into north, south, east and west, with one of the four ‘totem’ groups – the *Kari*, *Wau*, *Wilthuthu* and *Wiltu* – ‘owning’ a particular territory. People inherited both their territory and their ‘special’ totem (*parū*) from their parents.⁹ *Parū* relations are therefore regularly and predictably reproduced from generation to generation.¹⁰ Although each family group had their own area of land, rights to country were flexible. Elder Tim Hughes stated that, although each group had their own places, Narungga ‘were all in together’ and ‘others could come along there’:

there were different areas for this, different for that, and some people always hunted up there at the Hummocks, some down the bottom, some near the centre, some other places, but everyone shared special things when the time was right.¹¹

Narungga met at predesignated places to perform ceremonies and share resources.¹²

In addition to their *parū*, each individual ‘owned’ or ‘belonged to’ various sub-totems known as *kuyia*.¹³ Unlike *parū*, *kuyia* were not inherited but came from an extraordinary event which was interpreted by the mother (or another closely affiliated woman) as

signalling the unborn child's connection with particular animals and places; thus *kuyia* allowed for unpredictable and more widespread connections. Narungga *kuyia* include trevally, snapper, tommy rough, silver whiting, jumping mullet, travelling mullet, silver bream, wombat and wallaby. The numerous fish *kuyia* demonstrate Narungga's close connection with the sea. Narungga had a special proprietary interest in their *parū*, and to a lesser degree their *kuyia* – it was a serious crime to eat another's *parū* without permission and, although less grave, 'decent' Narungga would not eat another's *kuyia* without first seeking permission.¹⁴ Understanding Aboriginal people's connection to their country, which also includes the plants and animals endemic to the region, is crucial to the process of making sense of early cross-cultural encounters.

1802: The arrival of 'big white birds'

At the end of a hot, dry summer over two hundred years ago, Narungga observed a huge, graceful vessel sailing upon the vast body of water we now know as Spencer Gulf. The unprecedented appearance of ships must have caused great interest amongst Aboriginal onlookers. Places of first sightings, anchorages, the season, weather conditions – all would have been noted, analysed and incorporated into attempts to make sense of such events. In 1928, Susie, a Wirangu woman from Denial Bay (Eyre Peninsula) sang of a beautiful big white bird 'which came flying in from over the ocean, then slowly stopped and, having folded its wings, was tied up so that it could not get away'.¹⁵ Ethnographer Norman Tindale translated this as the Nauo people's description and interpretation of early sailing ships. Whether excited or apprehensive, mystified or gratified, the question of how to react and whether to communicate their presence on shore would have stirred passionate debate amongst Aboriginal groups.

Upon first entering the head of the gulf, Matthew Flinders, captain of the *Investigator*, saw fires 'upon the eastern shores opposite to Point Lowly' and noted 'wherever I had landed there were traces of natives ... it should therefore seem that the country here is as well inhabited as most parts of Terra Australis ...'¹⁶ Sailing crews were well aware that 'smokes' – plumes of smoke rising from a