CONTENTS

VOLUME 29 NO. 1

The spirit of Penney, a biographical sketch of Richard Penney
    Robert Foster

‘The Spirit of the Murray’, a poem by Richard Penney
    (Introduced by Robert Foster)

Richard Penney as ethnographer
    Philip Clarke
Introduction

The newspaper writings of Dr Richard Penney, published in the South Australian Register, The Examiner and the South Australian Magazine from August 1840 to November 1843, contain some of the earliest impressions Europeans recorded of the South Australian landscape and its inhabitants. Notable is Penney’s annotated poem, ‘The Spirit of the Murray’, which vividly describes the distinctive physical and cultural geography of the Lower Murray and Coorong region. In this paper, the significance of Penney’s writings as a source of ethnographic data is assessed. Although the volume of information published by Penney is small in comparison to other ethnographers, he nonetheless recorded some important comparative material. To demonstrate this, his cultural data is used in this paper to critically review some models of Aboriginal social structure put forth by later scholars.

The background of Penney

Penney’s time in South Australia was brief: he arrived from England on the Branken Moor in February 1840 and died of consumption in January 1844. Nevertheless, from his quickly acquired knowledge of the Aboriginal people he produced reports that warrant scholarly attention. Penney became particularly familiar with the Lake Alexandrina and Coorong areas through his employment as ‘Surgeon to the Fisheries’ at nearby Encounter Bay. His early experiences included two expeditions down the Coorong to investigate the Aboriginal murders of the Maria shipwreck victims; the first with Lieutenant Pullen in July 1840, and the second with an all Aboriginal crew in April 1841. After moving to Adelaide, Penney unsuccessfully petitioned the Government for an appointment as a Protector of Aborigines, first on the northern reaches of the Murray, and then at Port Lincoln. In August 1842, Penney became the editor of The Examiner newspaper. He retired from this position in March 1843, moving to Port Lincoln where he worked as a medical officer until his death.

The Lower Murray and Coorong Geography

The Lower Murray and Coorong together form a natural region that was, at the time of European settlement, a connected waterway. Penney’s poem, ‘The Spirit of the Murray’, was clearly intended to give the reader an introduction to this region’s cultural and physical geography. The sites mentioned in this work are predominantly around Lake Alexandrina and the northern end of the Coorong, being those places that Penney actually visited (see Fig. 1). The Aboriginal place-names he records are, in most cases, the first European renderings of them. Penney gives Lake Alexandrina the name Parnka. Taipang, now known as Point Sturt, features prominently in Penney’s Murray River creation myth, being to Aboriginal people the ‘first location of their ancestors’. Opposite Taipang, Penney names the cliffs of Churcherriwa. This locality is near the Point McLay Aboriginal settlement, which was established as a mission in 1859. Interestingly, my own fieldwork in the Lower Murray indicates that this landscape feature has much contemporary significance to the local Aboriginal community, who call it simply ‘Big Hill’. It is the site of the Point

![Figure 1](image-url)

Lake Alexandrina and the Lower Murray River.
McLeay cemetery, which still serves as the chief burial place for Ngarrindjeri people. The hill forms a prominent landmark that is clearly visible from the opposite side of the Lake. Toolarong is another Aboriginal place name used by Penney in his poem, applied to the country southwest of Churcherriwa along the edge of the Coorong. Other terms are Kukakun to mean Kangaroo Island, and Toolcoon as a land to the north-north-east of the Lower Murray. In a letter published in a newspaper, Penney gives an account of his search along the Coorong for survivors of the Maria shipwreck and names the site where some of the bodies were found as Noongong.

Penney refers to the Coorong as the ‘southeast branch of Lake Alexandrina’. This brings to the attention of the modern reader the considerable change wrought upon Australia’s longest river system since European settlement. Today, the Lake and Coorong are no longer united - barrages keep the lake side fresh and the Coorong salty. A reminder of the yet unexplored status of the interior of much of south-eastern Australia in the 1830s and early 1840s is illustrated by Penney’s fanciful postulation that the ‘Wimmeira’ (= Wimmera) River of Major Mitchell emptied itself by subterranean channels into the sea near Rivoli Bay in the Lower South East of South Australia. Penney was struck by the abundant wildlife he had observed on Lake Alexandrina. His portrayal of the environment in the poem is enriched by several footnotes in which he details aspects of Aboriginal artefact use in the region.

Aboriginal mythology

The shreds of Aboriginal myth incorporated into ‘The Spirit of the Murray’ provides an account of the creation of the Lower Murray landscape not recorded elsewhere. In Penney’s version, it is said that ‘Coma’ was an ancestral spirit driven into the region from the north north-east by a sorcerer’s fire. In the myth Coma was eventually saved by the formation of the Murray River which burst from the ground, extinguishing the flames. This differs significantly from other recorded accounts of the creation of the river in Lower Murray mythology, most of which tell of the ancestor Ngurunderi creating the Murray by chasing a giant cod. It is interesting to note that another spirit mentioned by Penney, Ooroondool, is probably a rendering of Ngurunderi without the initial sound of ‘ng’ - often not heard by European listeners. Although Ooroondool is heralded here as the ‘creator of the world’ and the ‘instructor of mankind’, the creation of the Murray River is not attributed to him. However, this is consistent with the outline of the myth given in Meyer’s account of ‘Nurunderi’ from Encounter Bay.

The variations in the mythology as recorded by Penney are probably best explained by the cultural affiliations of Penney’s informants. One was an Aboriginal boy from Currency Creek, the other described as a boy belonging to the ‘Wationg tribe’. Most subsequent mythological accounts of the formation of the Lower Murray landscape give greater prominence to the river. Many of these views of the creation appear to have come from Yaralde speakers of the southern
and eastern shores of Lake Alexandrina. As with myth epics from other parts of Australia, the telling of Lower Murray myths, such as Ngarunderi, probably varied widely throughout the region according to cultural group affiliations. Penney’s poem also includes spirit creatures, like the ‘Muldaubie’, believed to sometimes take the form of a ‘screech-owl’. My fieldwork with Lower Murray and South East Aboriginal people has shown that beliefs in such beings are still strongly held in the region. Therefore, some elements in Penney’s writings of the 1840s still have continuity with the present.

Aboriginal social structure

Penney identifies a number of Aboriginal groups in his work. For instance, he notes that several ‘Van Dieman’s Land’ Aboriginal people lived among settlers at Encounter Bay. These Tasmanians would have had links with the European whaling and sealing community on Kangaroo Island. Of the indigenous inhabitants, Penney records a number of groups, such as the Milmenyra, Sekinyra, Kamyra, Tenkinyra and Toora ‘tribes’. These were grouped by him into the ‘Lower Murray (or ‘Picaninni Murray’) tribe’ and ‘Big Murray (or ‘Milmenyra’) nation’ (see Fig. 2). The latter were implicated by Penney in the Maria massacre of 1840. The main ‘tribal’ terms used by later scholars such as Taplin and Tindal do not appear in his work (see Fig. 3). Taplin gives prominence to ‘Narrinyeri’ as the Lower Murray ‘tribe’ or ‘nation’. Tindale lists terms such as Tanganekald, Jarildekald, Portaulun, Warki and Ramindjeri. Penney recognised that Aboriginal people in the region from Cape Jervis, to Morphett’s Station (Wellington), and down to Cape Jaffa essentially formed one language group. However, he did not specifically name this larger unit. Instead, in the context of his poem, he describes the Aboriginal people as ‘Coma’: meaning ‘black man... the name of the native race’. This term has been recorded elsewhere in the Lower Murray as a variation of ‘korne’, meaning ‘man’. Therefore, although Penney identified a distinctive cultural bloc, there appears to have been no single term that was obtainable from Aboriginal sources of the late 1830s and early 1840s to describe it.

By the time Taplin founded the Point McLeay Aboriginal Mission in 1859, the use of ‘Narrinyeri’ had emerged to express the cultural unity of the Lower Murray and Coorong people. This term had been recorded by Meyer in 1843 as reportedly meaning ‘Australian native; mankind’. Taplin gave this word a sharper focus, applying it to just the Lower Murray people. As Penney did not record this as a Lower Murray group term - using ‘Coma’ instead - it appears that...
the use of ‘Narrinyeri’, to define the Aboriginal people of the Lower Murray as a distinct cultural group, is of post-European origin. I therefore suggest that ‘Narrinyeri’, as defined by Taplin, represents a ‘reinvention of tradition’.

In order to demonstrate that some
Aboriginal group terms were created, or at least redefined, after European colonisation, we must look more closely at the cross-cultural processes involved. I argue that one effect of the initial European disruption of Aboriginal social structure was the polarisation of many Aboriginal group terms. In the Lower Murray, European colonisation increased the direct contact between Lower Murray people and foreign Aboriginal groups who formerly occupied geographically and culturally remote regions. In this context, the creation of ‘identity terms’ served to distinguish local groups from the newly created or enhanced ‘other’. Adding to this, the emerging prominence of Point McLeay as one of the focal points for European and Aboriginal relations in southern South Australia, gave increased validity to the widespread contemporary use of ‘Narrinyeri’ to mean Lower Murray Aboriginal people. Today, this word (now uniformly written as ‘Ngarrindjeri’) signifies one of the strongest Aboriginal cultural identities in Aboriginal Australia.

Although some Aboriginal group terms were redefined after European colonisation, there is evidence to suggest that some other ‘tribal’ terms used by ethnographers after Penney have been the product of the misinterpretation of ethnographic sources. For instance, Penney’s concept of ‘Coma’ may help to explain the existence of what appears to be a related word, ‘Kaurna’, which is widely used today as a ‘tribal’ term to define the Adelaide people. However, in spite of its common use, the origin of this name is unclear in available ethnographic accounts from the Adelaide region. The term ‘Kaurna’ was not used to describe the people of the Adelaide region in 19th century ethnographies, nor is there reference to any other comparable group term for the Aborigines of the region. The first recorded mention of the term ‘Kaurna’ is by Wyatt in 1879 used to describe an Aboriginal man named Encounter Bay Bob. Later, in 1904, ‘Kaurna’ was featured on a map drawn by Howitt and appeared to cover the Adelaide area. Nevertheless, in the text of Howitt’s book, he refers simply to the ‘Adelaide people’, in spite of his use of Aboriginal derived terms from other areas as ‘tribe’ names. This map has apparently confused some ethnographers. For instance, one scholar interpreted the location of the ‘Kaurna’, from Howitt’s map, as ‘North of Adelaide’. first recorded uses of ‘Kaurna’ were tentative and vague.

The significant development in the use of ‘Kaurna’ came when Tindale, with little explanation, adopted ‘Kaurna’ to mean the ‘Adelaide tribe’. Exactly how he elicited this word from his Aboriginal informants is not clear. Tindale simply states that: ‘In 1931 the term Kaurna was checked and approved by Ivaritji (Ibaritji) the last full-blood survivor of the tribe’. It is an explanation that leaves the reader guessing whether or not Ivaritji actually recognised ‘Kaurna’ and in what sense. Following Tindale, most scholars have defined the pre-European Adelaide Aboriginal people as ‘Kaurna’. Today the term is widely used by Aboriginal people as well as the general public.

The absence of early ethnographic references to the ‘Kaurna’ must bring into question its validity as a term denoting a pre-European Aboriginal cultural group. On the basis of Penney’s explanation of ‘Coma’, I consider it likely that ‘Kaurna’ was incorrectly interpreted by scholars as an Adelaide term, when it was actually used by people of the Lower Murray cultural complex to define Aboriginal people in general. A point in support of my argument is the fact that Encounter Bay Bob, the only person described as ‘Kaurna’ in the pre-1900 literature, was actually a person employed by Penney. In all contexts in which Encounter Bay Bob is mentioned by Penney, his membership of the large Lower Murray cultural bloc is suggested. This strengthens the likelihood of a connection between ‘Kaurna’ and ‘Coma’. It therefore seems logical that ‘Kaurna’ was derived from the Encounter Bay language, which varies greatly from that formerly spoken around Adelaide.

The use by ethnographers of ‘mankind’ terms - as I argue ‘Kaurna’ is -to describe particular cultural blocs and ‘tribes’ is common in other parts of Australia. For instance, the river people from north of Murray Bridge have been termed ‘Meru’, meaning ‘man’. Similarly, the early ethnographic material of Adelaide defines several groups with the postfix, ‘-meyunna’, a variation of ‘meyu’ which meant ‘man’. For instance, to the Adelaide people ‘a north-
eastern tribe’ was Marimeyunna 47 and ‘the natives on the banks of the lake’ were ‘Pangka meyunna’. 48 In light of what appears to be poor evidence for the use of ‘Kaurna’, it is surprising that Tindale didn’t choose ‘Meyu’ to mean the ‘Adelaide tribe’. However, I do not advocate the substitution of ‘Meyu’ for ‘Kaurna’. In line with serious anthropological criticisms of the ‘tribe’ concept, I assert that the use of such large ‘tribal’ terms is problematic in the pre-European situation. 49 The main landowning groups are better described as descent groups, which were generally much smaller units than what has generally been defined as ‘tribes’ by those such as Tindale. Linguistic groups and cultural blocs may have defined Aboriginal people in a pre-European setting, but they not readily linked to rigidly bounded geographical areas.

Ethnographic significance of Penney’s work
In spite of Penney’s observations of Aboriginal culture being subsequently overshadowed by much larger works by Meyer and Taplin, his account stands out as being less encumbered by missionary preconceptions. In contrast, the studies of Meyer and Taplin, who were both missionaries, were largely concerned with aspects of Aboriginal culture that helped them in the Christian conversion of Aboriginal people. For this reason, Aboriginal language and religion are major interests of theirs. An additional problem with using Taplin as an ethnographic source on pre-European Aboriginal culture, is that by the time his research commenced, Lower Murray people had already experienced over twenty years of colonial domination by Europeans. Taplin’s account is therefore to a large degree written as an ethnographic reconstruction, although this fact is not clearly stated by him. The strength of Penney’s commentary is that it supplies us with some comparative material from a non-missionary source, recorded in a period before direct European colonial pressure had significantly altered Aboriginal social structures and practices in many parts of the region. The insights gained from reading Penney’s reports can illuminate problems with the ethnographic literature. Dr Richard Penney therefore deserves acknowledgment as an important contributor to the ethnographic literature of southern South Australia.

ENDNOTES
2 Penney’s arrival on board the Branken Moor is recorded in the Davies’ Diary, cited in A. A. Lendon, ‘Dr Richard Penney (1840-1844)’, Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, SA Branch, 1929-30, vol 31, p. 20. His death is reported in the South Australian Register, 15 January 1844. See Foster, this Journal, for biographical details.
3 Penney signed himself as ‘Surgeon of the fisheries’ at Encounter Bay see South Australian Register, 1 August 1840. This post was taken up in July 1840, Lendon, op. cit., p. 20.
4 For an account of Penney’s Lower Murray expeditions see Pullen’s letter in the South Australian Register, 15 August 1840, Penney’s letter in the South Australian Register, 24 April 1841, & Penney’s lecture published in the South Australian Register, 26 June 1841. See also Lendon, op. Cit. pp. 20-23.
5 Lendon, op. cit., pp. 27-29, 6 ibid., op. cit., pp. 27, 32. Foster, see article in this Journal, states this was The Examiner.
8 ibid., 1842, pp. 292-298; 1842, pp. 389-394; 1842, pp. 467-472.
9 ibid., 1842, pp. 472.
10 ibid., 1842, pp. 467-492; 1842, p. 22.
11 ibid., 1843, p. 36.
12 ibid., 1842, p. 470.
13 Letter dated 19 April 1841, published in the South Australian Register, 24 April 1841.
15 ibid., p. 22.
16 ibid., p. 20.
17 ibid., 1842, p. 470.

The Spirit of the Murray’, in the South Australian Magazine, 1843, vol. II, p. 331. It is unclear where the ‘Watiung tribe’ was located, but it was probably on the northern side of Lake Alexandrina.

For instance, the generation of ‘new’ mythology by the Pintupi of the Western Desert is illustrated by F. R. Myers, Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (Canberra 1986), pp. 64-68.


In Penney’s account of the Maria murders, he gives names of the Aboriginal groups involved, South Australian Register, 24 April 1841. This was added to in Penney’s lecture published in the South Australian Register, 26 June 1841.

Taplin (1874), (1879).


Report from Dr R. Penney to the Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands, Inward Correspondence, GRG 35/5/1841/336. State Records. Meyer (1843, title page), supported Penney’s claims by stating that the language being recorded at Encounter Bay was spoken throughout the Lower Murray, with only slight variation.


Meyer (1843, p. 84), recorded Taplin’s ‘Narrinyeri’ as ‘Narinyeri’. This term, which has particular relevance to contemporary Aboriginal communities in the Lower Murray, is generally spelled as ‘Ngarrindjeri’.

Taplin (1874), p. 1; Taplin (1879), p. 34.

Hemming (1990); Clarke, in press.

ibid.

The main early Adelaide ethnographies were C. G. Teichelmann & C. W. Schurmann, Outlines of a Grammar... of the Aboriginal Language of South Australia (Adelaide 1840) & C. G. Teichelmann, Aborigines of South Australia (Adelaide 1841) and Dictionary of the Adelaide Dialect, (1857 MS), South African Public Library.


A. W. Howitt, Native Tribes of South-east Australia (London 1904).


Tindale (1940), (1974).


See Clarke(1990 MS) for a critique of Tindale’s methodology.

Mention of Encounter Bay Bob is given by Penney in the South Australian Register, 15 August 1840 & by Lendon, op. cit, p. 23.

Taplin (1879), pp. 169.

Teichelmann & Schurmann, op. cit., Part. 2, p. 23.

ibid., p. 20.

ibid., p. 36.