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EDITORIAL NOTE

This issue of the Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia marks its transformation into a biannual publication. The minutes, notification of meetings and other news will now be contained in the Newsletter of the Anthropological Society of South Australia. The changes have been prompted by the increasing difficulty of gathering sufficient articles for inclusion in a monthly Journal, and a desire expressed by members of the Society to upgrade the quality and appearance of the Journal.

It is hoped that the Journal will continue to be a forum for articles of anthropological interest, reminiscences by, or about, Aboriginal people, rock art, etc. All manuscripts will be considered and can be sent to:

Secretary
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INTRODUCTION

I don’t pretend to be an explorer like yourself and others - only a traveller using what little abilities I possess in endeavouring to promote knowledge, be it of Aborigines, the country, botany etc. I prefer this life to that of civilization. The latter is false and the former if rough, is natural (Letter from Richard Maurice to Charles Winnecke, 1st September 1899).

Between the years 1896 and 1903 Richard Maurice funded and led at least eight private expeditions from Fowlers Bay on the west coast of South Australia into the Great Victoria Desert, at that time the last major tract of unexplored country in the state. Maurice travelled extensively throughout this region, a harsh, arid wilderness which subsequently remained untouched by white people until the early 1950s when it was selected as the location for the British nuclear weapons testing program.

After Maurice’s death in 1909 the SA Archives acquired a substantial collection of his manuscript material, including draft chapters of his unfinished autobiography, several unpublished papers describing the customs and lifestyles of the Aborigines as well as other notes, reminiscences and letters relating to his expeditions. The Maurice papers, which are now housed in the Mortlock Library of South Australiana, provide virtually the only detailed early accounts of the Great Victoria Desert and contain numerous references to the flora, fauna and landscape features as well as descriptions of the Aboriginal people and accounts of their habits and customs. A collection of several hundred photographs, taken by Maurice during his travels between 1899 and 1903, is also housed in the Mortlock Library. Some additional Maurice manuscript and photographic material is in the collections of the South Australian branch of the
Royal Geographical Society of Australasia. The Maurice manuscripts are currently being transcribed and edited by myself and Chloe Moeller for publication as a book which will be illustrated with a selection of Maurice’s photographs.

Maurice clearly was an excellent bushman and had a great love for the Australian outback. He was an interested and keen observer of the fauna, flora and Aboriginal inhabitants and an enthusiastic collector of botanical and faunal specimens. During his travels, he obtained from the desert people numerous ethnographic items, the majority of which he subsequently donated to the SA Museum. Maurice was the only white man to have any substantial contact with the Aborigines who inhabited the South Australian portion of the Great Victoria Desert prior to their migration into the European settlements on the west coast in the early years of this century. This paper documents Maurice’s observations of the desert people, supplemented with information obtained from other historical and ethnographic sources.

**RICHARD MAURICE’S OBSERVATIONS OF THE ABORIGINES**

Richard Maurice was born in Adelaide in 1859, the son of Price Maurice, a prominent pastoralist who at that time had leases over several large sheep stations on Eyre Peninsula and in the Mid-North. Richard developed a love for the bush while working on his father’s properties. He tried his luck on the Kimberley goldfields in the 1880s but became seriously ill and had to return to Adelaide. After a period of convalescence he went to Fowlers Bay where he found work with his friend George Murray, the manager of Yalata Station. Subsequently Maurice established himself as a kangaroo-hunter on the Nullarbor, Plain. Upon receiving a substantial inheritance after his father’s death in 1894, he quit kangaroo hunting and devoted most of his time and money to exploring what he referred to as the “back country”, the desert wilderness beyond the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain.

During his travels between 1896 and 1900, Maurice criss-crossed, with his team of camels, the country between the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain and the Everard Ranges and between the WA – SA border and longitude 133°. On most of these expeditions he was accompanied by Mungena, his Aboriginal friend and guide from Fowlers Bay, and other Aboriginal guides. Several of Maurice’s white friends from the west coast accompanied him on some of his expeditions, including Bill Voke, a general hand and cook, and Bob Scott, a camel driver. Apart from a few brief articles
published in newspapers at the time, the Maurice papers in the Mortlock Library constitute the only record of these early expeditions.

In the early years of the 20th century, Maurice undertook two more ambitious expeditions. The first, in 1901, took him from Fowlers Bay northwards across the desert to the Rawlinson, Musgrave and Everard Ranges in central Australia. In the following year he succeeded in crossing the continent from Fowlers Bay to Cambridge Gulf in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. On these two expeditions he was accompanied by a Government surveyor, W. Murray, whose journals were later published by the SA Government. Maurice made one further expedition into the desert country north-east of Ooldea in 1903 but this was to be his last. Physically debilitated after an arduous life in the bush, he retired to Sydney where he lived for several years. He returned to Fowlers Bay in early April, 1909, with the intention of organizing another expedition. However, on April 24 Maurice, while drinking at the Globe Hotel in Fowlers Bay, collapsed and died of a heart attack at the age of 49. He was buried on nearby Yalata Station.

Maurice has only two published articles to his credit, one a brief summary of a talk that he gave to the South Australian branch of the Royal Geographical Society on the Rawlinson Range expedition, published in the Society’s journal in 1902, and the other a lengthy account (about 7,000 words) of the 1902 expedition which appeared in the British publication The Wide World Magazine in 1905. Several draft chapters of the autobiography that he was writing at the time of his death are among the manuscripts in the Mortlock Library.

THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

The Great Victoria Desert, Australia’s largest dune desert, stretches from the edge of the Nullarbor Plain northwards to the Everard, Musgrave and Warburton Ranges and westwards from the Gawler and Stuart Ranges to near Laverton in Western Australia. This arid wilderness is a vast expanse of steep, longitudinal and parallel red sand dunes 20 m or more in height, vegetated with thick mallee and mulga scrub and spinifex. Exposures of calcrite and silcrete commonly occur within the inter-dunal corridors and large areas of gibber plain occur here and there throughout the dune field. The terrain is dotted with small salt lakes and claypans and there are a number of larger salinas, e.g. Lakes Maurice and Dey-Dey and the Serpentines, which mark palaeodrainage systems.

Ernest Giles, the first white man to cross this desert, considered it to be probably “the worst desert on the face of the earth”:

no traces of any human inhabitants were seen, nor were the usually ever-present tracks of native game, or their canine enemy the wild dingo, distinguishable upon the sands of this previously untrodden wilderness. The silence and the solitude of this mighty waste were appalling to the mind, and I almost regretted that I had sworn to conquer it (Giles 1889: vol II, 167).

Several newspaper reports of Maurice’s expeditions into the desert referred to them as “pleasure-trips”. Maurice’s general hand and cook on several expeditions, Bill Voke, sneered at that term, saying that “a man who wants to travel this country for pleasure will go to hell for a pastime” (MP 158/10).

EUROPEAN EXPLORATION AND CURRENT LAND USE

The Great Victoria Desert was named by Giles who crossed the desert from east to west during his expedition overland from Ooldea to Perth in 1875. Tietkins, who had accompanied Giles on that expedition returned four years later and explored some of the country north of Ooldea. Lindsay, the leader of the Elder Scientific Expedition of 1891-2, explored westwards from the Everard Ranges into Western Australia and then travelled south-west for more than 600 kms across the desert to reach Queen Victoria Springs, near Cundeelee, first discovered by Giles in 1875. J. W. Jones, the SA Chief Surveyor, penetrated a short distance into the desert from the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain in 1880 and in 1897 the Government Geologist, H. V. L. Brown, made a short foray northwards into the desert from Ooldea during his geological investigations in the west of the state.

Maurice was the only white man to travel extensively throughout the region. With the help of Mangana and his other Aboriginal guides he relocated the important waters first found by Giles and Tietkins - Ooldabinna, Punthanna and Boundary Dam - and was the first white man to visit Waldana, Tallarringa and Koonunda, the only other permanent waters. Maurice revisited most of these sites with Murray, the Government surveyor, during the 1901 expedition 10 the Rawlinson Ranges and the 1902 expedition across Australia. Murray accurately fixed the locations of these important water sources for the first time. In 1904 a Government prospector, Frank George, led an expedition, funded and equipped by Maurice, into the country north-west of Ooldea. George visited Punthanna and Waldana and then travelled west to Boundary Dam; he named Lake Maurice after the man “who has done so much towards the exploration of this back country”.

After George’s expedition the Great Victoria Desert remained untouched by white men until the early 1950s when Len Beadell carried out the initial surveys for the planned British nuclear tests at Emu and Maralinga. During these surveys Beadell relocated Tallaringa, Punthanna and Koonunda. In 1962 Beadell relocated Waldana during his surveys of road routes from Cook to yokes Hill (the latter named by George after Maurice’s general hand and cook, who accompanied the 1904 prospecting expedition) and from Emu westwards to the state border (Beadell 1967, 1971). Most of the South Australian portion of the desert was declared a Prohibited Area for the duration of the nuclear testing program and restrictions on access remained in force until the late 1960s. Since that time the only white people to visit the region have been the occasional adventurous tourists) mining company personnel scientists and fox and dingo shooters.
In 1984 the Maralinga Lands were handed back by the SA Government to its Aboriginal owners, represented by an incorporated body, Maralinga Tjarutja which is based at the Yalata Reserve. The Maralinga Lands stretch northwards from the Trans-Australian Railway to the southern boundary of the Pitjantjatjara Lands, taking in the northern edge of the Nullabor Plain and most of the South Australian portion of the Great Victoria Desert. The Maralinga people have since established an out-station at Oak Valley, near Lake Dey-Dey. The “Unnamed” Conservation Park, encompassing about 2 million hectares, is sandwiched in between the Maralinga Lands and the SA - WA border. This park is adjoined by the Great Victoria Desert Flora and Fauna Reserve to the west of the border.

A recent joint study by the SA National Parks and Wildlife Service and the WA Department of Fisheries and Wildlife recommended the establishment of a two-state national park that would encompass most of the South Australian portion of the Nullarbor Plain as well as an adjoining portion in Western Australia and would also extend northwards to join up with the “Unnamed” Conservation Park and the Great Victoria Desert Flora and Fauna Reserve (McKenzie & Robinson 1987). The Australian Heritage Commission has identified the Nullarbor Plain/Great Victoria Desert region for possible listing as a World Heritage area. The South Australian and Western Australian governments are currently investigating the feasibility of this proposal.

THE ABORIGINES OF THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

At the time of European contact the eastern portion of the desert was the territory of the Kokatha tribe. Ooldea, a permanent soak on the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain, traditionally belonged to the Kokatha but was shared with neighbouring tribes during times of drought (Tindale 1974: 69). The Kokatha’s neighbours to the west were the Ngalea. According to Daisy Bates (1921: 76), the Ngalea’s principal water was Waldana Well, which is located about 70 km north-west of Lake Dey-Dey.

Little is known specifically of the customs and lifestyles of the Kokatha and Ngalea, but these two tribes and their neighbours to the north and west were part of what has been termed the “Western Desert culture”, encompassing most of the Aboriginal groups inhabiting the desert region of central and Western Australia (Berndt 1959: 93-5). All the tribal groups within this region shared similar systems of social and local organization, spoke closely related dialects and had similar religious beliefs and practices. Berndt noted that the Aborigines who had come into Ooldea from the desert used the term bila, meaning “spinifex people”, as a collective term to refer to the various tribal groups that occupied the dune country north of the Nullarbor Plain (Berndt, A. &C. 1942: 325).

MAURICE’S OBSERVATIONS OF THE ABORIGINES

During his expeditions into the desert Maurice encountered Aboriginal groups and individuals on numerous occasions and was always able to establish friendly relations with them. Maurice had a deep interest in Aboriginal culture. He spoke several of the local dialects and according to one of his friends, “no-one knew more about the blacks” than Maurice:

> he had so won their confidence that he was admitted into their ranks - a unique honour that he ever respected and prized. He wore a mark on his arm that took him into any camp, and secured to him the confidences of the tribes. He never had the slightest trouble with the blacks during his lonely journeyings in silent places (Observer 1/5/1909).

Some of the Aborigines that Daisy Bates met at Ooldea in the 1920s and 1930s had encountered Maurice during his travels in the desert; they called him “Murilyi” and spoke highly of him. She wrote that:

> all the men who saw Maurice pass and were so friendly towards him, owing to his kindly dealing with them, came into civilization and passed out --, and the children, now grown men, are the last of those groups who saw “Murilyi”, Maurice, on his great journey. Cannibal groups all of them, frightened of camels and white men, but responding every one to Maurice’s kindly treatment of them (DB 1 21 XIV 16 C).

Maurice’s guide on most of his expeditions, Mungena, was a Wirangu man from the Colona area. Photographs taken of him around the turn of the century indicate that he was probably between 30 and 40 years of age at that time. He was a fully-initiated man and had travelled widely in his youth, visiting Waldana, Tallaringa and many of the other far-flung waters in the desert. As well as having an intimate knowledge of the land and its animals and plants, Mungena was an excellent tracker, specimen.Collectors interpreter and story-teller. He was apparently devoted to Maurice whom he called “Noonie”. Maurice described Mungena as:

> gifted with marvellous intelligence in all bush law, and a general favourite with the whites, and possessing some inexplicable powers over all the blacks we came across (1905:361).

Mungena accompanied George on the 1904 prospecting expedition north of the Nullarbor Plain. George later wrote in a letter to Maurice that:

> Mungena is a good worker, a first-class tracker and water finder and kept us constantly amused around the campfire with his tales of adventure and the folklore of the natives (MP 158/56).

Mungena is occasionally referred to in Mrs Bates’ manuscripts. She called him “Munjinya” or “Munbinya”. He was living at Pintumba, near Yalata, at the time of Dr. Basedow’s visit to the west coast in 1920 (GRG 23/1/87/1921). Mungena died in the 1930s or 1940s.
Maurice visited Ooldea on numerous occasions during his early career as a kangaroo-shooter and used the soak as a base camp during most of his later expeditions. He wrote that Ooldea was:

(a great meeting place of the blacks, where the different tribes assembled, bartered, exchanged the interesting topics of the day, settled any disputes and initiated the native boys into manhood (MP 158/1 4).

According to Maurice, Ooldea marked the boundary between the coastal tribe and the desert tribes beyond. He wrote that:

to the eastward (of Ooldea) the once-famous Cocatha tribe existed but now they have all come into civilization, some entering the Wilgena mob, others Gawler Range and Streaky Bay. To the westward are the Whatriga (Boundary Dam) tribe, some of whom have come in and don’t wish to return to a land of so much uncertainty of life. Going northierly some hundred odd miles Ooldea] we come to Parrinna (Paraminna ) Dam, another big meeting place for the Punthanna, Waldana and Cocatha blacks. The former extend to the eastward to a permanent water called Tallaringa. . . Going north-westerly we reach the centre of another tribe, namely the Waldana, which takes its name I presume from the permanent spring or soak which exists there. This was once a most vigorous mob but now greatly reduced in numbers by sundry causes the chief of which is the frequent attacks made by the northern tribes, probably the Tomkinson and Mann Ranges mobs, who kill both men and women (MP 158/45).

Maurice observed on numerous occasions during his travels the great fear that the “sandhill natives”, as he called them, had for their neighbours from the cartoo (hilly) country to the north. These people, evidently Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara, made frequent attacks on the desert people. The attractions of the European settlements along the coast, combined with the ever-present threat of attack by these hostile tribes, made many of the desert people abandon their country. Maurice wrote that:

within the last 20 years the Wynbring, Waldooana (Waldana] and Watriga (Boundary Dam) tribes have nearly all come to the coast and none appear to desire to return to their own country where they lived in constant dread of being killed by the Oolia and Chadina blacks who live to the north of their locality (MP 157/4).

Post-contact Aboriginal movements

Giles traversed the country of the Kokatha and Ngalea in 1875 but it was not until the 1880s when kangaroo-shooters commenced operating along the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain that the Aboriginal people first came into sustained contact with whites. Historical accounts indicate that shortly afterwards Kokatha and Ngalea people began to periodically visit Fowlers Bay to get rations, tobacco, clothing and other goods (Gara & Cane 1988:148-55).

Maurice, in an address given in 1901 to the South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society, noted that there were about 300 Aborigines in the Fowlers Bay district, consisting of remnants of the original coastal tribes, the Miming and Wirangu, as well as many people from the desert to the north:

-taking Fowlers Bay as the base, we find here a mixed body of blacks numbering some 300, consisting of members of the Eucla, Streaky Bay, Gawler Ranges, Cocatha, Waldoono, Whatregta tribes and remnants of the old coast tribes. These blacks are in various stages of civilization, wanting money, besides the ancient stipend of clothes and tobacco. A Lutheran Station has been started some 60 or 70 miles away from Fowlers Bay but beyond giving some clothes to the blacks they have done little as the natives promptly decamped. These blacks mostly pass away their time by going from one settler to another, cutting scrub and killing rabbits, when not having their own meetings. The game in this locality consisted of kangaroos, Iowan, wallaby, wombat and turkey but now it is chiefly rabbits, the kangaroo and wombat being about exterminated (MP 158/45).

A ration depot was established at Fowlers Bay in 1865 and provided food and blankets and other supplies to the coastal people dispossessed of their lands by the white settlers. Only sick or aged Aborigines were provided with rations; able-bodied men were supposed to work to support themselves and their families. In the 1880s Aborigines from the sandhill country beyond the Nullarbor Plain began to visit Fowlers Bay seeking rations. Maurice noted that Aborigines travelled great distances to reach the Fowlers Bay depot:

-Fowlers Bay having been for many years an Aboriginal depot, where the Government serves out to the old and crippled blacks flour, tea, sugar, tobacco, blankets etc, it is readily understood that many blackfellows visit the spot. They now come from all parts, some from Western Australia, some from hundreds of miles in the interior and some from the more settled districts to the eastwards (Maurice 1905: 358).

The slow drift of the desert people towards the settlements continued into the 20th century and greatly accelerated after the construction of the Trans-Australian Railway commenced in 1914. Many of the people still living in the desert were lured in to the settlers’ camps and the sildings along the line by the availability of food, tobacco and alcohol. Many of them eventually made their way to Ooldea, the traditional meeting place for the tribes of the southern part of the desert. Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people, forced from the mountain ranges in central Australia by a severe drought, also drifted into Ooldea, a process that continued into the 1950s and 1960s (Cf. Brady 1987). The lifestyle of the Aborigines
References to food sources, hunting techniques and other aspects of Aboriginal culture are scattered throughout the Maurice manuscripts. Some of these are discussed in later sections of this paper. In one short unpublished paper entitled “Ethnological investigations of the tribes north-west and north-east of Fowlers Bay”, Maurice provided a general outline of the lifestyle of the desert Aborigines:

the sandhill natives who consist of the Waldoona, Wynbring, Punthi (Punthanna) and Watriga tribes are mostly a short wiry race, emaciated certainly but capable of going long distances with but little water and less food, their powers of tracking and observation are particularly keen. They live mostly on rats, iguanas, eggs, roots of various bushes and grass seeds which they have to obtain by being everlastingly on the move. These sandhill natives obtain their water from rockholes of various capacity, from dams made in clayspans, native wells which in some cases are permanent as well as from the mallee roots and some particular kinds of trees as well as the black oak. These tribes are scattered about the sandhills in small numbers during the winter but in summer they meet at permanent waters where they remain till rain comes and replenishes their outside country (MP 157/4).

Aboriginal dams

Several of the early explorers reported the discovery of Aboriginal dams in this region. These dams were usually low, semi-circular walls of clay, sometimes interlaced with boughs and foliage, constructed on clayspans or other suitable depressions (Bates Australasian 27/8/1921). Giles discovered two such features, one at Pylebung, about 90 km south-east of Ooldea, and the other, which he named Boundary Dam, in the Forrest Lakes just over the border in Western Australia. Giles described Pylebung as:

a circular wall or dam of clay, nearly five feet high, with a segment open to the south to admit and retain the rain-water that occasionally flows over the flat into this artificial receptacle. This piece of work was two feet thick on the top of the wall, twenty yards in the length of its sweep, and at the bottom, where the water lodged, the embankment was nearly five feet thick. The clay of which this dam was composed had been dug out of the hole in which the water lay, with small native wooden shovels, and piled up to its present dimensions (1889: vol 2p. 92-3).

In 1875 Tietkins discovered a dam at Arndinga, near Lake Maurice, (Giles 1889: Vol 11, 159) and during his explorations four years later he found another small dam called Winderabbi somewhere north-west of Punthanna (Tietkins 1961: 28). Maurice found a number of dams during his travels in the desert, including Midgening, about midway between Lake Maurice and the state border, Chilbinga, about 40 km south-east of Midgening, Paraminna, about 120 km north of Ooldea, and Minindoo, about 10 km north-west of Ooldabinna. Maurice also visited Boundary Dam on two occasions. Maurice revisited Paraminna during his 1901 expedition with Murray, who described the dams in his journal:

the dams are on the eastern end of the flat on a clayey patch, and are of little value so far as conservation of water is concerned, they being sifted up to about the original level. They are of interest as showing the handiwork of the natives. The embankments, shaped somewhat like a horseshoe, are of the clay interlaced with mulga twigs, and the blacks must have expended an unusual amount of energy in building them with their rude appliances (Murray 1904: p. 5).

Murray noted that the dams “seem fairly plentiful in this country”; he found several more dams and a number of brush fences used by the Aborigines in hunting wallabies a few kilometres from Paraminna. Maurice also found another dam while exploring to the north-east of Paraminna. During his 1904 prospecting expedition George saw four dams. He described Arndinga, first found by Tietkins, as “elliptical in shape, 23 ft long, 18 ft wide on waterline, and from 12 in. to 18 in. deep”. The three other dams were Waribinga, a small dam north-east of Lake Wyola, Koolkoona, on the western side of Lake Wyola, and Midgening (George 1905: 2-3).

Obtaining water from tree roots

Many of the early explorers of the region (e.g. Giles, Jones and Brown) noted that the Aborigines relied to a great degree on the water they obtained from the roots of mallee, black oak and other trees. According to Mrs Bates the principal water-bearing trees in the Ooldea area were called yaggala, a red mallee, and nabbari, a white mallee (Argus 28/12/1929). Johnston & Cleland (1942: 99-100) suggested that the trees referred to by Bates were probably varieties of Eucalyptus oleosa. Tindale pointed out that the Ngalea were able to exploit the mallee scrub along the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain by obtaining the water they required from mallee roots while the Pindiini further to the east also relied heavily on these trees, shifting their camp every day from one grove to another (Tindale 1974: 40, 215).

During his explorations, Maurice often found evidence of the Aborigines having obtained water from tree roots. Near Boundary Dam during his 1897 expedition, he came across the tracks of some Aborigines and noticed: where they had obtained water from the black oak (casuarinas). They lever up the roots, break them in pieces and suck out all the water they can which makes a very refreshing drink (MP 158/10).

Maurice himself had to resort to drinking root water several times during his travels. In his article published in The Wide World Magazine, Maurice wrote:

on one occasion it was entirely owing to Mungena that I did not perish miserably in the desert. We had been some days without water, and I, at any rate, was feeling depressed and exhausted. To my surprise Mungena suddenly manifested symptoms of great joy on seeing a peculiar species of tree,
known as “ilburra” (probably the black oak), plainly observable amid the monotonous sea of sand. Taking a little stick he levered up the roots, which he then proceeded to chop into bits. These he drained into our pannikins, and in a short space of time we got four cans full of good water, which saved our lives. The roots of this remarkable tree -invaluable in a thirsty land like Australia - extend from the trunk some twenty or thirty feet in a horizontal direction, and are a little deeper in the ground than those of the mallee tree, from which water is also obtained (1905: 362).

PRINCIPAL WATER SOURCES IN THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT

Aboriginal wells, soaks and rockholes are scattered throughout the dune country but permanent waters are few and far between. Ooldea Soak, on the southern edge of the desert, was never known to tail and was the principal refuge for the desert tribes in times of drought. In the desert itself there were a number of other waters that were of a more-or-less permanent nature; Waldana, Boundary Dam, Ooldabinna, Koonunda, Tallaringa and Paraminna. The locations of these waters is shown on the accompanying map. Between 1896 and 1903 Maurice visited all of these waters, some of them three or four times.

Boundary Dam

Boundary Dam was discovered by Giles during his 1875 expedition; he described it as a small elliptical-shaped dam about 3 m long and 1 m wide but about 2 m deep when full, situated on a claypan (1889: Vol II, 173-4). Tietkens (1887: 38) noted that when full the dam would have held about 18,000 litres. Maurice referred to the dam as “Wadriga” or “Wadriga” according to Mrs Bates, the dam’s Aboriginal name was “Wardargana” (Australasian 1/5/1920) and it as associated with a mallee-hen totem group (Register 13/5/1927). She noted that an Aboriginal route or “highway” led from Boundary Dam in a south-easterly direction to Muckerra Rockhole, on the northern edge of the plain. From there one route led south directly across the treeless plain to Koonalda Cave while another route skirted the northern edge of the plain to Ooldea and then continued on towards Fowlers Bay (Australasian 20/7/1918, 27/7/1918). In her manuscript collection in the Barr-Smith Library Mrs Bates provides the names of some of the waters along this route as well as details of other routes leading north and north-west from Boundary Dam (c f DB 411113b: 32).

In 1896 two WA Government officials, Mason and Yonge, visited Boundary Dam. While they were camped there they were attacked by Aborigines, who drove off the camels and stole most of the supplies. The two men, carrying what little food and water they had left, set out on loot for Eucla, 300 kms away to the south across the treeless plain. On the 6th day they were forced to kill their pet dog for food and they survived by sucking the morning dew from plants. Weak and delirious, they staggered into Eucla eight days after leaving the dam (Mason 1921).

Maurice first visited Boundary Dam in 1897 with Bill yoke and Mingo, an Aboriginal man from Eucla. Maurice wrote that while searching for the dam among a patch of small salt lakes:

I... noticed a small smoke some 200 yards away. Picking up my rifle, Mingo and I walked in the direction of it and found a middle-aged black awaiting our approach. It is their custom to draw attention by a little smoke and await results. Mingo being a coast black could not converse with him but I, knowing a little of the Cockata blacks’ language gathered that his name was Injida and that the lake (wiola) where we had camped (the previous night) was called Bulkdunnina.

Injida led Maurice, yoke and Mingo to the dam, cutting Giles’ 1875 track on the way. Maurice wrote:

In another half hour we came upon Wadriga or Boundary Dam which runs NE and SW is pretty square in shape and surrounded by sandhills at the SE end. There is a little flat beneath a rain-washed side of a sandhill exposing clay with a little creek connecting it with the lake. This the natives have dammed up to about 5 ft high and 10 ft broad and thrown bushes in to prevent evaporation. On the NE side is another hole square in shape, but filled up with silt. This Injida stated to be the work of whites and we afterwards proved that these same whites must have been Giles’ party. To the east are two dams called Coolardunna (MP 158/10).

Maurice located Giles’ camp at the south-western end of the lake and found several pistol and rifle cartridges there. Nearby was a marked tree and another trial well. Maurice noted that to the north of Giles’ camp there was an Aboriginal grave which Injida said was of a man killed by hostile Aborigines who had come down from the north. A group of Aborigines came into the camp later in the day and Maurice questioned them concerning the attack on Mason and Yonge the previous year. They said that they had heard of white men travelling with camels a long way to the north (possibly the Elder Scientific Expedition in 1891-2). They claimed they had never seen white men at Boundary Dam and denied all knowledge of the attack. Maurice suspected they were not telling the truth and some years later he apparently discovered that the Aborigines he had talked to had themselves been involved in the attack.

Injida told Maurice that a large group of Aborigines were camped at a water some distance to the north. Maurice learnt that the group consisted of 30 men and 45 women:

Injida conveyed to me the number by making marks on the ground with a stick. He could only count to five and so when he came to five he made a longer mark... He told me the names of them all and for each name made a separate mark taking first the blacks then the lubras then the children. By watching him very carefully and adding all his marks together I was able to ascertain how many there were. That night all the blacks camped close to us, making no wurleys but building fires between each of them.
Maurice, with some of the Boundary Dam group as guides, explored to the north through “dreadful sandhills”, reaching Lake Wilpardo which is on the state border about 40 kms north of Boundary Dam. From there the Aborigines led Maurice south-east for about 30 kms to a small rockhole called Coopoolagina and then to Poodioorbinna Well, 20 km further to the south-east. He wrote that the well:

was 12 ft deep and full of dirt which we laboriously cleaned out but found nothing. Whilst working the blacks brought us some Calandrinia balonensis but which they term murangill. As this plant contains a large amount of moisture it is much appreciated by all travellers in the interior.

Leaving the well, Maurice travelled southwards to Muckera Rockhole on the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain and then returned to Fowlers Bay via Ooldea.

Maurice returned to Boundary Dam in 1900 but no detailed account of that expedition has survived. Frank George located the dam, with Mungena’s help, during his 1904 prospecting expedition. He wrote that Boundary Dam:

was a difficult water to find, there being no conspicuous natural features or leading marks whereby the locality could be described or recognized. It is situated on the south bank of a small salt lake, close alongside a small cliff of sandstone and porcelainised sandstone (George 1905: 2).

George noted that Giles had incorrectly fixed the dam’s location about 25 km too far to the west.

Maurice wrote in 1901 that some of the Boundary Dam tribe had already come into the coastal settlements and no longer wished 10 return to a land of so much uncertainty of life” (MP 158/45). According to Mrs Bates, by the early 1920s there were only a few surviving members of the “big group of mallee-hen totem people who owned Boundary Dam and other good waters in that area” (Sydney Morning Herald/6/1922). In 1927 she wrote that there were only about six Boundary Dam men left alive, “all derelicts wandering along the East-West line and the west coast of South Australia and between the WA goldfields and Taroola” (Register 13/5/1927).

Waldana

Waldana is an Aboriginal well about 70 kms north-west of Lake Dey-Dey, Mrs Bates referred to it as Wandunya, the principal water of the Ngalea tribe (1921: 76). The well was associated mythologically with ganba, the giant snake believed to inhabit the caves and blowholes of the Nullarbor Plain, who fought with milbaril and meeda, two species of goanna, at that spot during the Dreaming. According to Mrs Bates, ganba put the water into the ground where the well is situated and himself vanished into the ground there (Bates Australasian 28/7/1923; 1938: 145). In 1897, Brown, while camped at Punthanna, obtained from local Aborigines the names of a number of waters to the north-west. One of these was “Wandinna”, said by the Aborigines to be “a big rockhole containing a snake” (Brown 1898: 3). This water was probably Waldana.

Richard Maurice was the first white man to see Waldana. He was first led to the well by his Aboriginal guide Mingo in 1897 and he revisited the spot on several subsequent occasions. According to Maurice:

the well measures 12 ft 6 inches deep to rock in which there is a small fissure running north and south, exposing sides of white sandstone through which the water percolates. The water has a black sediment. The percolation comes quicker from the north and south ends of the shaft.

When he arrived at the well during his second visit in 1899 there was an Aboriginal group camped there: (they) ran away at our approach but on the boys calling out returned and assisted us in getting the rubbish out of the hole when we then watered the camels. The residents through my boys explained the hole (Waldoona) had never known to be dry. These blacks were a most primitive lot, under-sized, decrepit and awfully thin and with few weapons for defence or sport. Both Tommy and Albiner (his guides, both “sandhill natives”) seemed anxious to remain until the rest of the tribe came in from the NW and NE where they were living on mallee-root water, lizards, grubs, bandicoots of the pig-footed kind and different sorts of rats not found near the coast. The blacks stated that there had been no rain for a very long time and that all the rockholes and most of the native wells were dry (MP 158/28).

Maurice camped with the Aborigines there for several days and obtained some information from them on rockholes and other water sources in the country to the north. The Aborigines helped him collect specimens of the fauna and flora and staged several corroborees for his benefit. Maurice wished to explore to the north but his two guides, and the local group, were reluctant to travel in that direction, fearing the hostile tribes who inhabited the hilly country to the north, and Maurice was forced to return to Ooldea.

Maurice revisited Waldana in 1900 and again in 1901 during his expedition with Murray to the Rawlinson Ranges. Murray was initially unimpressed by Waldana:

at about 7 miles reach Waldana Spring, a little stagnant water showing up in the well. Cleared out several tons of horribly stinking mud and removed it clear of the well. A very unpleasant job, Voakes (sic), who was down below, having the worst of it (Murray 1904: 6).

Murray obtained 20 buckets of water that day and was surprised to find the following day that the level had risen considerably. In his journal Murray noted that the well was located on the northern side of a gypseous flat bordered by sandhills to the north and, to the south, an area of gypseous banks and mounds, timbered with mallee and ti-tree.
Numerous deserted wurleys were seen in the vicinity of the well but there were no Aborigines present at the time of Murray and Maurice’s visit. Murray noted that the water:

- is not palatable, but it is very hard for washing purposes, and has a slight laxative effect. After standing a while a dark sediment forms, and it has a peculiar and unpleasant drying effect on the throat. Nevertheless he believed it to be a valuable resource and he estimated that it would yield 1,300 litres per day. George, who visited Waldana in 1904, suggested that the water was a soakage rather than a spring as Maurice believed. George also noted that the well provided about 1,000 litres per day but he thought the flow would be greatly diminished by steady use (George 1905: 2).

Maurice and Murray established a base camp at Waldana and remained there for about 10 days while they explored the surrounding country. The party then pushed on in a north-westerly direction for the Tomkinson Ranges. Four days later they arrived at Pat Auld’s Vat, a large rockhole discovered by Maurice on an earlier undocumented expedition, and named by him in honour of a friend in Adelaide. This rockhole is about 5 m deep and more than 2 m in diameter. Murray estimated that when full, it would hold more than 20,000 litres (Murray 1904:9). A few kilometres away, Maurice discovered a number of shallow wells at a soak which he named Gill’s Soak after T. Gill, a friend in the South Australian Treasury. Murray wrote that:

there is but little timber for some distance around the soakage; it never was very dense, and the blacks having camped here in numbers for ages past have gradually denuded it. . . This is a valuable water, and any party making for the ranges could always rely on getting water here. Natives have not been here for a long time in any numbers, and evidently this is one of the places they keep until prolonged droughts render the rockholes and small native wells useless (Murray 1904: 10).

Pat Auld’s Vat and Gill’s Soak are situated near the north-west corner of the Unnamed Conservation Park. Neither has been revisited since the time of Maurice and Murray’s expedition.

In an unpublished ethnographical paper Maurice noted that the permanent supply of water available at Waldana enabled the Aborigines to camp there all summer long. However, as soon as the rains set in:

- and water was obtainable at the various rockholes and other natural catchments, the younger members left the camp in small parties to roam the country in all directions in search of food, the local supply having become depleted (MP 157/1).

In another of his manuscripts, Maurice wrote that:

- naturally most of the animals in the neighbourhood f Waldana] are exterminated and the natives have to travel far to get meat, the principal animal being the small rat which makes its nest at the base root of the mulga and is easily caught by stamping one’s feet on the bunch of dried leaves and thus preventing its escape (MP 158/36).

Maurice described the Waldana people as “very hospitable” in an address delivered after the 1901 expedition:

- some few years back I went out there with two blacks and spent some 10 days with the mob who entertained me with corroborees, got me (faunal/botanical) specimens and generally were very thoughtful of my comfort. Most of those who have come in to the coast are very handy for light work but none are much use with the axe. About 200 would be their total it they were all mustered up (MP 158/45).

In 1920 Daisy Bates requested assistance from the SA Government to establish a camp either at Waldana or Punthanna for the Aborigines who had drifted into Ooldea but the Protector of Aborigines ignored her requests (bates 1938: 207). Mrs bates noted that soon after the construction of the railway, Waldana had become “empty of the great emu and iguana (goanna) group which once owned it” (Sydney morning Herald, 17/6/1922). In another newspaper article published in the following year, she stated that remnants of the original Waldana group were at that time scattered between Ooldea, Fowlers Bay and Eucla, and none had any desire to return to their own land. Mrs Bates suggested that pioneering pastoralists could settle at Waldana and run their sheep along the northern edge of the Nullarbor, using the railway to obtain supplies and to send their wool off for sale (Australasian 28/7/1923).

**Ooldabinna**

Ooldabinna is an Aboriginal well about 30 km east of Lake Dey-Dey. It was first found by Tietkins during Giles’ 1875 expedition. This well is occasionally referred to by Mrs Bates and others as “Mobun”; according to Maurice, the Waldana tribe and others to the west called it Mobun while the people to the east called it Ooldabinna (MP 158/36). Mrs Bates noted that Ooldabinna was connected mythologically with Ooldea, the small marsupial kapitji having brought the water to both places durin

Giles wrote that Ooldabinna was a place where:

- for untold ages the natives have obtained their water supplies. There were several wells, but my experience immediately informed me that they were simply rockholes filled with soil from the periodical rainwaters over the little flat, the holes lying in the lowest ground, and I perceived that the water supply was very limited (1889: Vol II, 162).

Giles established a base camp at Ooldabinna while searching for water to the north and west. Maurice learnt from the local Aborigines many years later that they had planned to attack Giles’ men while they were camped at Ooldabinna.
The Aborigines had apparently surrounded the camp and were about to launch their spears. However, the camels became uneasy at the Aborigines’ approach and when the animals stood up and bellowed, the warriors became frightened and fled. According to Maurice “Giles and his party never knew this but the natives years after told me of their escape (MP 158/36).

Brown, the Government Geologist, visited Ooldabinna in 1897 but found the well and rockholes there dry. He noted that one of the rockholes was about 5 m deep (Brown 1898: 3). Maurice visited Ooldabinna in 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1903 but there is no detailed account of these visits among his remaining manuscripts. When Maurice and Murray visited Ooldabinna in 1901 they had to clean out the well which had a dead emu in it. Murray noted in his journal that no Aborigines appeared to have been in the area for a long time. He did note, however, that there were numerous wallaby fences in the area and “a cleared space where the natives hold their dances” (Murray 1904: p. 6).

Punthanna

Punthanna Well, sometimes referred to as “Punthi”, is situated about 120 km north of Ooldea. Mrs Bates referred to it as “Boonjana” (Register 6/9/1 920) or “Bunja” (DB 4/11/3b: 12). Punthanna was one of the waters along the Aboriginal route that led from the Everard Ranges across the Great Victoria Desert to Ooldea (Johnston 1941: 46-8). According to Mrs Bates another route led north-westerly from Punthanna to Ooldabinna and then around the northern end of Lake Dey-Dey to Waldana (DB 4/11/3b: 7, 12).

Punthanna was first found by Tietkins in 1875. He returned to the well during his explorations in 1879 and was told by a group of Aborigines that he found camped there that the name of the well was “Punthi” (Tietkins 1961: 28). Brown visited Punthanna during his geological investigations in the western part of the state in 1897. He wrote that the well:

is situated in the centre of a depression formed of ironstone and hard clayey loam, which serves as a catchment for any rain falling on it. The well is a burrow or sloping shaft, some 18 ft. deep, and was made by the Aborigines in following down the water, stored in the loose sand and debris which fills a hollow or wide crack in the indurated claystone and argillaceous grit. A little water was visible in the bottom of this hole, and six or eight bucketsful were obtained by deepening the well and waiting until the water drained into the soakage. Several radiating paths leading to the well were noticed, and some fresh tracks of natives were seen, but the natives themselves did not put in an appearance (Brown 1898: 2).

Maurice visited Punthanna a few months after Brown and again in 1898 while en route from Fowlers Bay on a “sightseeing tour” to Central Australia. Maurice described Punthanna as “a long narrow funnel of a well with just a glitter of water at the bottom”. Mungena and Maurice’s two other Aboriginal guides on the 1898 trip, Warn and Tilletunga, made contact with a local family group, consisting of an old man, two women and a child. Maurice wrote that:

the old fellow was very hospitable, giving me some pheasants’ (Leipoa ocellata) eggs which I reciprocated by giving damper, tea and tobacco all round and again in the morning (MP 158/14).

The old man told Warri and Tilletunga the locations of the waters between Punthanna and Oolarinna, a spring in the Everard Ranges which was Maurice’s next intended stop. Maurice’s party followed the directions given them but many of the rockholes were dry. The men were still a day from Oolarinna and almost dying of thirst when some fresh Aboriginal tracks were noted. Mungena and Tilletunga tracked the group while Maurice and Warn covered themselves with sand to keep cool. Maurice wrote:

several hours after, my mouth nearly on fire, I opened a tin of raspberry jam, thinking that probably more moist than the others and this I devoured with Warn who was suffering very much from thirst. In the night Mungena and Tilletunga returned with a small mob of wild blacks with water in their wooden dishes and thus got us out of our misery (MP 158/16).

Maurice revisited Punthanna in 1900 and again with Murray in 1901. They cleaned out I he well and obtained sufficient water for their camels at a depth of about 4 m. Murray was surprised to find a line cleared through the scrub leading to the well:

this line was... cleared by the blacks and runs straight to the native well, being about 90 chains in length. Murray noted that he had never seen any other similar cleared line and he suggested that: probably some visitor to or from the coast was illustrating to others how white men cleared their surveyed hundred boundary lines (Murray 1904: 5).

According to Maurice the territory of the “Punthanna tribe” extended eastwards to Tallaringa. He wrote that:

these Punthanna blacks are not to be depended upon. Most of the thievry on the coast is done by members of this tribe who return to the mob and wait until the whites have forgotten and then return. To pursue them would be useless as they can find water in the roots of trees which would be insufficient for a white man and camel (MP 158/45).

Tallaringa

Tallaringa Well, called “Thalerinya” by Mrs Bates (DB 4/11/3b: 11) is located about 230 km north-east of Ooldea. Maurice first heard of Tallaringa Well from the Aborigines at Punthanna during one of his early visits there. He wrote that:
Tallaringa... was described to me by the Punthi (Punthanna) blacks as a native well with stone at the bottom and when cleared of debris the water comes up with a puff, thus making me believe that it’s artesian; they say it has not been seen by whites and that it makes them constipated (constipated) (MP 158/45).

Maurice made one unsuccessful attempt to locate Tallaringa during a trip from Tarcoola to Fowlers Bay in 1900. He found the well for the first time during his overland expedition to Cambridge Gulf with Murray in 1902. Maurice wrote: On the 9th day out from Ooldea we reached Tallaringa, a water supply which had never been seen by whites, but which the natives had frequently talked of, although they would not show it to anyone. I found that the surface of the water was fifteen feet below the ground-level, the liquid being contained in a bed of soft, absorbent sandstone. We were able to obtain a thousand gallons a day, a supply which could possibly be very greatly increased by enlarging and slightly deepening the well. This is the most important permanent water known to the blacks for many miles, the nearest permanent water being about two hundred miles away” (Maurice 1905: 361).

Murray noted that there were many deserted Aboriginal camps for a considerable distance around the well and he also believed that the well was probably permanent (Murray 1904: 25-6).

Maurice returned to Tallaringa in 1903 with Mungena and another Aboriginal man, Yarrie, who had accompanied the 1902 expedition as far as the Musgrave Ranges. A newspaper account of this trip states that at Tallaringa: the feed was dry and no blacks had been about for some time. In fact there were no traces of anybody’s presence for a good period. After digging out 6 ft of dirt an unlimited supply of water was obtained. Strange to say it was brackish - the party lived on it for a fortnight - while during the dry season it was practically fresh (Observer 10/10/1903).

Tallaringa was not visited again by white men for nearly 50 years until it was relocated by Len Beadell during his surveys for the British nuclear testing program (Beadell 1967: 14-5).

Koonunda
Koonunda Well, referred to by Mrs Bates as “Koorundoona” (Australasian 28/7/1923) is a permanent water about 160 km north-north-east of Ooldea. Maurice and Murray were led to this well by a local Aboriginal man during their return trip to Fowlers Bay from the Rawlinson Ranges in 1901. According to Murray the well was situated in an open flat and a good supply of water was obtainable at a depth of about two metres. Murray described Koonunda as: a first-rate camping ground - plenty good water, good mulga for firewood, fair-sized trees for erection of tents, shades etc and first-rate feed..... I attach great importance to this well, as it is about half-way, almost in a direct line, between the permanent waters at Ooldea and Oolarinna the Everard Range, and is possibly itself permanent (1904: 22).

Maurice evidently visited Koonunda on one other occasion. In 1905 he stated that:

when I was at Koonunda I witnessed a native ceremony which brought to mind what I had heard about “Irish wakes”. Two native women came into camp and reported that one of their number had been speared by some blacks from another tribe. They thereupon set up a dirge or funeral cry, accompanied by terrific yells, shrieks and moans. With the exception of the three black boys I had brought from distant parts, the whole party gave forth most weird howls. I tried to photograph them, but the sight of the camera caused them to cease their antics. While all this was going on the three who did not join in stood silently and reverently apart, with downcast heads and solemn faces (1905: 442).

Paraminna Dams
This group of three small dams about 40 km east of Punthanna was first located by Maurice in 1900 and revisited by Maurice and Murray in 1901. The dams were situated on a small claypan rimmed by gypseous banks; Murray’s description of them was quoted earlier in this paper. Maurice noted that Paraminna was a meeting place for the Punthanna, Waldana and Kokatha tribes and an important trade and ceremonial centre (MP 158/36, 45).

ABORIGINES AS SPECIMEN-COLLECTORS ETC
In his earlier career as a kangaroo-hunter, Maurice learnt the value of the Aborigines’ intimate knowledge of the country and its animals and, like most of the other white hunters operating on the Nullarbor Plain, he employed teams of Aborigines to hunt the kangaroos, finding it:
advantageous to employ blacks owing to their knowledge of the ways and habits of the kangaroos and their agility in tracking and shooting them. On an average the blacks would always bring in more kangaroos than the white man no matter what weapons they were supplied with (MP 158/5).

On his later expeditions he utilized the knowledge and tracking skills of Mungena and his other guides to obtain many specimens of birds, mammals, insects and reptiles, as well as plants and bush foods etc. Maurice evidently sent some of the faunal specimens to Baldwin Spencer for classification, others were sent to Maurice’s friend and fellow explorer, Charles Winnecke. Some of the specimens are now in the SA Museum collections. The Aborigines appeared to enjoy the task of getting specimens although they failed to understand the reasons behind it:
dated 4th August 1901, Maurice wrote: 

appreciated; he enjoyed their company in the bush far more than that of whites. In a letter to his friend Charles Winnecke

mainland. Maurice wrote: 

belonging to one of the two species of stick 

marsupial mole, with Mungena's help of course: 

other specimens for the Museum (Observer 10/10/1903). On one expedition in the 1890s Maurice had obtained a 

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27/8/1921). Maurice tried to obtain specimens of the marsupial mole for Prof. Stir 

knew the marsupial mole as "arritarita" according to Maurice or "arrajuraju" according to Daisy Bates (Australasian 

burrowing beneath the surface of the sand dunes, seeking inse 

Prof. Stirling in 1891. Even today little is known of the life 

cycle or habits of this creature, which spends most of its life 

beneath the surface of the sand dunes, seeking insects for food. The Aboriginals of the Great Victoria Desert 

knew the marsupial mole as "arritarita" according to Maurice or "arrajuraju" according to Daisy Bates (Australasian 27/8/1921). Maurice tried to obtain specimens of the marsupial mole for Prof. Stirling at the SA Museum during his 1902 expedition. He returned to Adelaide with an extensive collection of geological, ethnological and faunal specimens but was unsuccessful in capturing any moles: 

I obtained many valuable ethnological specimens, which I have already handed to the Museum. 

Among the specimens is one of a pig-footed bandicoot, which is very rare, and much prized by 

scientists. We were unable to get a marsupial mole, although we saw tracks of the animal, and 

Mr Murray had the pleasure of seeing for the first time the natives tracking marsupial moles 

under the ground (Register 21/11/1 902: 5). 

Maurice mounted another expedition in 1903 to the Tallaringa area in an attempt to obtain specimens of the mole 

but was again unsuccessful although a newspaper account noted that Maurice brought back many rare birds’ eggs and 

other specimens for the Museum (Observer 10/10/1903). On one expedition in the 1890s Maurice had obtained a 

marsupial mole, with Mungena’s help of course: 

On our way to Youldeh we saw many of the pretty little notorcytes typhiops, called by the 

natives arritarita. It is a kind of marsupial mole and is very difficult to catch. One day I noticed 

a fresh track and called Mungena’s attention to it. He tracked it for some time and at last came 

to a small hole down which it had evidently descended. Making a small circle he pushed the 

tracks up again and followed till we came to another little excavation. Here he paused, saying 

“You stop here, we catch ‘urn” then with raised hat and glistening 

eyes he crept cautiously 

along on tiptoe, following the scratching noise of the little animal beneath the ground. Then, 

with a bound, he jammed his hand down in the soft ground and pulled the little yellow creature 

out. They can be traced by a line of rising in the soil which occurs every foot or so. They breed 

about July or August and it is supposed by the natives that when the young get big the mother 

leaves them and returns only to give them milk. The young have been seen in the pouch. The 

natives as a rule take a great interest in catching them (MP 158/6). 

On another occasion, while crossing the Nullarbor Plain en route to Boundary Dam in 1897, Maurice found a nest 

belonging to one of the two species of stick-nest rats, both of which are now believed to be extinct on the Australian 

mainland. Maurice wrote: 

we came across a nest of those peculiar rats which Eucla natives call Walityera and are to be 

found on the coast and in the sandhills... Their nests are usually about 5 ft high and 12 to 15 ft 

in diameter and of a conical shape. Not all of the animals that Maurice captured were preserved 

for later scientific study. He noted that stick-nest rats, “although small, are very delicious when 

made into a curry” (MP 158/10). 

It was not just the Aborigines’ skills at tracking, finding water and getting specimens and bush food that Maurice 

appreciated; he enjoyed their company in the bush far more than that of whites. In a letter to his friend Charles Winnecke 

dated 4th August 1901, Maurice wrote: 

I intend tackling the north country with blacks if all goes well; for specimens and bush 

information you can’t beat them. For me bush life without blacks would be simply intolerable 

for the ordinary white man after a few weeks either repeats his stories over again or invents 

others, both of which are painful to have to hear, whereas the black reads the bush like a white 

the newspaper and there is always something fresh every day (MP 158/40).
MAURICE’S CONTRIBUTIONS

At the time of Maurice’s explorations, the Great Victoria Desert was the one significant area of uncharted country remaining in South Australia. After Giles’ crossing of the desert in the vicinity of latitude 30° in 1875, a large blank area still remained on the map between Giles’ line and the Mann and Tomkinson Range in the north-west corner of the state, explored by Giles in 1874. The Elder Scientific Expedition of 1891-2 had filled in some of this blank area but it was almost entirely due to Richard Maurice that this last remaining uncharted region was mapped. The significant contribution that he made to the exploration of this state received little official recognition at the time and has been largely ignored in most studies of the history of the exploration of this state.

The Maurice papers provide a valuable source of information on the flora, fauna, Aboriginal people and early European exploration of the Great Victoria Desert and Nullarbor Plain region. However, these papers have so far received little attention from researchers. The publication of these papers will make the information more accessible to anthropologists, historians, geographers, biologists and specialists in other disciplines and may also lead to the important contribution that Maurice made to our knowledge of the region being properly recognized. Recognition for Maurice’s contribution would be timely, as current proposals to establish a national park encompassing most of the Nullarbor Plain and Great Victoria Desert and possible World Heritage listing will promote local and international awareness of the importance of the region’s natural and cultural features.

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