NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The third General Meeting of the Society for 1983 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00PM MONDAY, 23 MAY, 1983

AGENDA

1. Apologies.

2. Minutes of Previous General Meeting.
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held Monday, 25 April, 1983 to be confirmed. A copy of these minutes is attached.

3. New Members.
   No new members were elected to the Society for this month.

4. Papers and Journals.
   Papers and Journals from other Societies and Organizations will be tabled at the meeting.

5. Business.

6. Film Evening.

   White Clay and Ochre
   Documentary on Field Research in western N.S.W., including methods of investigation.

   Narritjin in Canberra
   Documentary by Ian Dunlop about the work of Narritjin Maymura and his son Pana when they were Artists in Residence at the National University, Canberra.

7. Supper.

MARGARET NOBBS,
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BURKE AND WILLS, AND THE AbORIGINES

ANDREW TAYLOR

Address given to the General Meeting of the Anthropological Society, 25 April, 1983.

The land belonged to the aborigines and had done back to the Dreamtime when totemic ancestors had formed the features of the landscape. Every hill, spring and creek having origin in some action by these ancestors. The legends passed down by word of mouth and recorded in some paintings, decreed numerous rules of conduct and explained the situations likely to be encountered by aborigines. Hence, the appearance of white men, horses and camels must have quite startled the aborigines at first.

Wills' journal, Saturday January 19, 1860: "We surprised some blacks — a man, who, with a young fellow, apparently his son, was upon a tree cutting out something, and a lubra with a picaninny. The two former did not see me until I was nearly close to them, and then they were dreadfully frightened. Jumping down from the trees they started off, shouting what sounded to us very much like 'Joe, Joe'. Thus disturbed, the lubra, who was some distance from them, just then caught sight of the camels and the remainder of the party as they came over the hill into the creek, and this tended to hasten their flight over the stones and porcupine grass."

McKinlay tells us that there were several hundred aborigines in the north east corner of South Australia in 1861. The white man's intrusion in to this area was to reduce these numbers to a handful by the turn of the century.

The attitudes of the early explorers towards the aborigines varied. Burke distrusted the aborigines and Wills' journal suggests that in common with virtually all of his fellow 'New Australians', Burke regarded the aborigines as lowly unintelligent savages. Even scientists of the nineteenth century believed this, so that in 1892 S. Laing in his book 'Human Origins' uses the Australian aborigines to illustrate is assertion that "In the case of the exact Sciences, such as Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy...their progress can be traced step by step by the development of human reason. Thus there are savage races, like the Australians at the present day, who cannot count beyond 'one, two, and a great number'...even the chimpanzee Sally could count to five."

On Sunday December 16 1860, the first day out of Depot LXV heading for the Gulf of Carpentaria, Wills' comment: "A large tribe of blacks came pestering us to go to their camp and have a dance, which we declined. They were very troublesome, and nothing but the threat to shoot them will keep them away;... they appear to be mean spirited and contemptible in every respect.", is a far cry from the story six months later when Wills was to describe the aborigines as "...my friends, the blacks." His journal entry for Tuesday, June 4 1861 reads "Started for the blacks' camp, intending to test the practicability of living with them, and to see what I could learn as to their ways and manners." Six months survival in this harsh environment gave Burke and Wills a grudging admiration for the aborigines ability to live and live well in a land where they were shortly to die.

The aborigines seemed to want to meet and be friends with the explorers. "Thursday December 20...There was a large camp of not less than forty or fifty blacks near where we stopped. They brought us presents of fish, for which we gave them some beads and matches." Wills fails to mention that, according to Burke, the natives also offered their women, and Wills goes on to say "...it is a remarkable
fact, that these were the first blacks who had offered us any fish since we reached Cooper's Creek." From the latter it would seem that Burke's party had not enjoyed cordial relations with the aborigines near Depot LXV, and indeed, Brahe's first task after Burke's departure was to build a stockade. Burke wrote to the Exploration Committee: "There is no danger to be apprehended from the natives if they are properly managed." Wills would have liked navigation help from the aborigines, but the next morning "We left Camp 70 at half-past five a.m., and tried to induce one or two of the blacks to go with us, but it was of no use."

Burke records that "Upon two occasions, at Cooper's Creek and at King's Creek, on New Year's Day, whenever the natives tried to bully or bounce us and were repulsed, although the leaders appeared to be in earnest, the followers, and particularly the young ones, laughed heartily and seemed to be amused at their leaders' repulse. The old fellow at King's Creek who stuck his spear into the ground and threw dust in the air, when I fired off my pistol, ran off in a most undignified manner." Perhaps tribal leaders felt that in order to maintain face they should not appear surprised or afraid of these curious beings who were trespassing on their tribal lands. It is therefore quite understandable that younger tribal members would derive pleasure from their leader's discomfiture, just as we enjoy the cartoonist's attacks on our political leaders today.

Burke and Wills travelled northwards, the first Europeans to see the country near present day Birdsville, but reminded continually that they were certainly not the first men to walk here. Saturday January 5 1861: "The well worn paths, the recent tracks of natives, and the heaps of shells, on the contents of which the latter had feasted, showed at once that this creek must be connected with some creek of considerable importance." Further information on how the natives obtained food was also seen: "At the upper end of the creek we found in its bed what appeared to be an arrangement for catching fish. It consisted of a small oval paddock, about 12 ft by 8 ft, the sides of which were about 9 inches above the bottom of the hole and the top of the fence, covered with long grass, so arranged that the ends of the blades overhung scantily by several inches the sides of the hole." On January 12 "I observed that the natives here climb trees like those on the Murray, &c., in search of some animal corresponding in habits to the opossum, which they get out of the hollow branches in a similar manner."

Sunday February 17: "After floundering through this (water) for several miles we came to a path formed by the blacks, and there were distinct signs of a recent migration in a southerly direction. By making use of this path, we got on much better, for the ground was well trodden and hard. At rather more than a mile, the path entered a forest, through which flowed a nice watercourse, and we had not gone far before we found places where the blacks had been camping. The forest was intersected with little pebbly rises on which they had made their fires, and in the sandy ground adjoining some of the former had been digging yams, which seemed to be so numerous that they could afford to leave lots of them lying about, probably having only selected the very best. We were not so particular, but ate many of those that they had rejected, and found them very good. About half a mile further, we came close on a black- fellow, who was coiling by a campfire, whilst his gin and picaninny were yabbering alongside. We stopped for a short time to take out some of the pistols that were on the horse, and that they might see us before we were so near as to frighten them. Just after we stopped, the black got up to stretch his limbs, and after a few seconds looked in our direction. It was very amusing to see the way in which he stared, standing for some time as if he thought he must be dreaming, and then, having signalled to the others, they dropped on their haunches and shuffled off in the
quietest manner possible. Near their fire was a fine hut, the best I have ever seen, built on the same principle as those at Cooper's Creek, but much larger and more complete. I should say a dozen blacks might comfortably coil in it together....Proceeding on our course across the marsh, we came to a channel though which the sea-water enters. Here we passed three blacks, who, as is universally their custom, pointed out to us, unasked, the best part down. This assisted us greatly, for the ground we were taking was very boggy." The three aborigines here on the Gulf of Carpentaria were able to take the appearance of white men in their stride, they and their forebears having presumably encountered a variety of visitors by sea in the past.

Wills' journal makes little mention of aboriginal contact on the return trip to Depot LXV, except for the third last day when he noted: "Camped again without water, on the sandy bed of the creek, having been followed by a lot of natives who were desirous of our company; but as we preferred camping alone, we were compelled to move on till rather late, in order to get away from them."

This preference not to have anything to do with the aborigines was soon to change when the seriousness of Burke and Wills' situation became apparent at Depot LXV, the now famous 'Dig Tree'. Even though the rations left buried by Brahe seemed ample on first examination, three days later, having decided to try and reach Mount Hopeless in South Australia, the explorers "...were fortunate enough to get about twelve pounds of fish for a few pieces of straps and some matches, &c. This is a great treat for us as well as a valuable addition to our rations." Burke and Wills practice a little skullduggery here, knowing that travelling in the opposite direction to them, the aborigines "...would be able to get lots of pieces for nothing, better than those they had obtained from us." Despite this, the next day "Our friends the blacks, from whom we obtained the fish, made their appearance with a few more, and seemed inclined to go with us and keep up the supply. We gave them some sugar, with which they were greatly pleased. They are by far the most well-behaved blacks we have seen on Cooper's Creek." Although still patronising, Burke and Wills' attitude towards the aborigines was now changing.

Tuesday May 2: "Breakfast by moonlight, and started at half past six. Following down the left bank of the creek in a westerly direction, we came, at a distance of six miles, on a lot of natives, who were camped on the bed of a creek. They seemed to have just breakfasted, and were most liberal in presentations of fish and cake. We could only return the compliment by some fishhooks and sugar."

With their last camel Rajah "completely done up" Wills begins to realise their plight and on Monday May 6 he concludes "I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months." On the following day; "We came to some blacks fishing. They gave us some half-a-dozen fish each for luncheon, and intimated that if we would go to their camp, we should have some more, and some bread. I tore in two a piece of macintosh stuff that I had, and Mr. Burke gave one piece, and I the other. We then went on to their camp, about three miles further. They had caught a considerable quantity of fish, but most of them were small. I noticed three different kinds - a small one that they called 'cupi', five to six inches long, and not broader than an eel; the common one, with large coarse scales, termed 'peru'; and a delicious fish, some of which run from a pound to two pounds in weight. The natives call them 'cawilchi'. On our arrival at the camp, they led us to a spot to camp on, and soon afterwards brought a lot of fish and bread, which they call nardoo. The lighting of a fire with matches delights them, but they do not care about having them. In the evening, various members of the tribe came down with lumps of nardoo and handfuls of fish, until we were positively unable to eat any more. They also gave us some stuff they call bedgery or pedgery.
It has a highly intoxicating effect, when chewed even in small quantities. It appears to be the dried stems and leaves of some shrub."

The next day Burke and Wills split up, travelling in opposite directions to trace the creek. Wills turned back when he discovered that his portion of the creek swung back around to the north. This caused him to pass the native camp again; "...and as I was about to pass, they invited me to stay. So I did so, and was even more hospitably entertained than before, being on this occasion offered a share of a gunyah, and supplied with plenty of fish and nardoo, as well as a couple of nice fat rats. The latter I found most delicious. They were baked in the skins. Last night was clear and calm, but unusually warm. We slept by a fire, just in front of the black's camp. They were very attentive in bringing us firewood, and keeping the fire up during the night." It comes as no surprise to see that Wills' journal entry the next morning, Thursday May 9, records: "Parted from my friends, the blacks..."

On Saturday May 11 while Burke and King go looking for the aborigines to learn all about nardoo, Wills stays behind to jerk meat and says that he, "...must devise some means of trapping birds and rats." At this time Wills finds the prospect of "...having to hang about Cooper's Creek, living like the blacks....a pleasant prospect." The explorers were unable to locate the aborigines, and so five days later on May 16, having left behind the unwanted items, Burke, Wills and King left camp intending a second attempt to reach Mount Hopeless.

Finding their loads still too heavy, they jettisoned more gear and pressed on. The chance discovery by King of a flat covered in nardoo seeds "...caused somewhat of a revolution in our feelings, for we considered that with the knowledge of this plant we were in a position to support ourselves, even if we were destined to remain on the creek and wait for assistance from town."

On Monday May 27 Wills "Started up the creek this morning for the depot, in order to deposit journals and a record of the state of affairs here." King records that "Before starting he got 3 lb of flour and 4 lb of pounded nardoo, and about a pound of meat, as he expected to be absent about eight days." Fortunately for Wills this meagre ration was supplemented by the aborigines. "I had not gone far over the first sandhill when I was overtaken by about twenty blacks, bent on taking me back to their camp, and promising any quantity of nardoo and fish. On my going with them, one carried the shovel, and another insisted on taking my swag, in such a friendly manner that I could not refuse them. They were greatly amused with the various little things I had with me. In the evening they supplied me with abundance of nardoo and fish; and one of the old men, Poko Tinnamira, shared his gunyah with me."

After his mission to the "Dig" tree, Wills once again was entertained by the generous aborigines on his return trip. "I was conducted by the chief to a fire, where a large pile of fish were just being cooked in the most approved style. These I imagined to be for the general consumption of the half a dozen natives gathered around, but it turned out that they had already had their breakfast. I was expected to dispose of this lot - a task which, to my own astonishment, I soon accomplished, keeping two or three blacks pretty steadily at work extracting the bones for me. The fish being disposed of, next came a supply of nardoo cake and water, until I was so full as to be unable to eat any more, when Pitchery allowing me a short time to recover myself, fetched a large bowl of raw nardoo flour, mixed to a thin paste, a most insinuating article, and one that they appear to esteem a great delicacy."
While Wills recorded such glowing accounts of his experiences with the aborigines, King and Burke were having slightly different experiences, perhaps brought about by their mistrust of the aborigines. King records: "A few days after Mr. Wills left, some natives came down the creek to fish at some waterholes near our camp. They were very civil to us at first, and offered us some fish; on the second day they came again to fish, and Mr. Burke took down two bags, which they filled for him; on the third day they gave us one bag of fish, and afterwards all came to our camp. We used to keep our ammunition and other articles in one gunyah, and all three of us live together in another. One of the natives took an oilcloth out of this gunyah, and Mr. Burke seeing him run away with it, followed him with his revolver, and fired over his head, and upon this the native dropped the oilcloth. While he was away the other blacks invited me away to a waterhole to eat fish; but I declined to do so, as Mr. Burke was away, and a number of natives were about who would have taken all our things. When I refused, one took his boomerang and laid it over my shoulder, and then told me by signs that if I called out for Mr. Burke, as I was doing, that he would strike me. Upon this I got them all in front of the gunyah and fired a revolver over their heads, but they did not seem at all afraid, until I got out the gun, when they all ran away. Mr. Burke, hearing the report, came back, and we saw no more of them till late that night, when they came with some cooked fish, and called out 'white fellow'. Mr. Burke then went out with his revolver, and found a whole tribe coming down, all painted, and with fish in small nets carried by two men. Mr. Burke went to meet them, and they wished to surround him, but he knocked as many of the nets of fish out of their hands as he could, and shouted out to me to fire. I did so, and they ran off. We collected five small nets of fish. The reason he would not accept the fish from them was, that he was afraid of being too friendly lest they should always be at our camp. We then lived on fish until Mr. Wills returned."

Whether or not Burke and King explained these events to Wills, he was firmly convinced that the aborigines were the key to survival, and "...he seemed to consider that he should have very little difficulty in living with them" said King. a decision to test the practicability of living with the aborigines was made on Tuesday June 4, and Wills went back to spend two days with them. Returning to Burke and King he "found that Mr. Burke and King had been well supplied with fish by the blacks."

Deciding to move near to the aborigines, the explorers "...found that the blacks had decamped...greatly to our disappointment." It seems that the aborigines had tired of supplying the white men with food, and gone walkabout. Whether this was by design or accident, Wills' enormous feast of food on Monday June 3 was the last time he saw his native friends. The strength and morale of the explorers sank lower daily, and Wills recorded on Monday June 24 "We have but a slight chance of anything but starvation, unless we can get hold of some blacks." Wills convinced Burke and King to go up the creek searching for aborigines, and died on or soon after Friday June 28 1861. Burke lasted only a couple of days more, leaving only King to tell the tale.

King, formerly a soldier in the Indian Army, had left India for the benefit of his health. Surprisingly, the one most likely to perish is left as sole survivor. His luck holds and "...two days after leaving the spot where Mr. Burke died, I found some gunyahs, where the natives had deposited a bag of nardoo, sufficient to last me a fortnight, and three bundles containing various articles. I also shot a crow that evening, but was in great dread that the natives would come and deprive me of the nardoo."
About ten days later, having returned and buried Wills, King found his nardoo running short and decided to track the aborigines. He shot crows and hawks on his way along the creek. "The native hearing the report of the gun, came to meet me, and took me with them to their camp, giving me nardoo and fish. They took the birds I shot and cooked them for me, and afterwards showed me a gunyah, where I was able to sleep with three of the single men." King explained the aborigines that Burke and Wills were both dead, and recorded: "They appeared to feel great compassion for me when they understood that I was alone on the creek, and gave me plenty to eat."

Four days later the aborigines decided to move camp, and indicated to King that he should go in the opposite direction, pretending not to understand them, and followed the aborigines to their new camp. Here he shot some crows "...which pleased them much that they made me a breakwind in the centre of their camp, as I came and sat round me until such time as the crows were cooked, when they assisted me to eat them. The same day, one of the women, to whom I had given part of a crow, came and gave me a ball of nardoo, saying that she would give me more only she had such a sore arm that he was unable to pound. She showed me a sore on her arm, and the thought struck me that I would boil some water in the billy and wash her arm with a sponge. During the operation the whole tribe sat round, and were muttering to one another. Her husband sat down by her side, and she was crying all the time. After I had washed it, I touched it with some nitrate of silver, when she began to yell and ran off, crying out, 'Mokow! mokow! (Fire! fire!). From this time, she and her husband used to give me small quantities of nardoo both night and morning, and whenever the tribe were about going on a fishing excursion, he used to give me notice to go with them. They also used to assist me in making a gourley, or breakwind, whenever they shifted camp. I generally shot a crow, or a hawk, and gave it to them to return for these little services. Every four or five days the tribe would surround me, and ask whether I intended going up or down the creek; at last I made them understand that if they went up I should go up the creek, and if they went down I should also go down, and from this time they seemed to look upon me as one of theirselves, and supplied me with fish and nardoo regularly. They were very anxious, however, to know where Mr. Burke lay; and one day when we were fishing in the waterholes close by I took them to the spot. On seeing his remains the whole party wept bitterly, and covered them with bushes. After this they were much kinder to me than before; and always told them that the white men would be here before two moons, and in the evenings, when they came with nardoo and fish, they used to talk about the 'whitefellows' coming, at the same time pointing to the moon. I also told them they would receive many presents, and they constantly asked me for tomasawks, called by them 'Bomayko'. From this time to when the relief party arrived - a period of about a month - they treated me with uniform kindness, and looked upon me as one of themselves. The day on which I was released, one of the tribe who had been fishing came and told me that the whitefellows were coming, and the whole of the tribe who were then in camp sallied out in every direction to meet the party, while the man who had brought the news took me across the creek, where I shortly saw the party coming down."