NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 1st General Meeting of the Society for 1985 will be held in:

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

ON

MONDAY 25TH MARCH 1985 AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of previous General Meeting:
   The Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held at the
   Conservation Centre, Monday 22nd October 1984, to be confirmed.
   A copy of these minutes is attached.

3. New Members:
   The following new members have joined the Society since the
   last general meeting:
   - Dr Rupert BEST
   - Mrs. M. BENNETT
   - Mrs D. TUNBRIDGE
   - Mr Fred. TEAGUE
   - Mr J.L. COONEY

4. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals from other societies and organizations will
   be tabled at the meeting.

5. Speaker:
   Mrs Virginia Kennedy will present an illustrated address:
   "A Traverse of the Gibson Desert."
   Mrs. Kennedy's son Ross served as surveyor and navigator for a
   crossing of the Gibson Desert by a party led by Mr Rex Ellis.
   Slides illustrating a NW - SE traverse - not previously attempted,
   will be shown. The party photographed fine examples of rock art.

6. Supper will be served.
THE MULGEWONGK

A water monster or "Bunyip" of the Lower Murray River region of South Australia.

by Steven Hemming, Division of Anthropology, South Australian Museum.

1. Introduction.

The Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray River, Lakes and Coorong area of South Australia still possess stories relating to spirits, monsters and other beings who are said to inhabit certain places in their traditional lands. Omens both good and bad transmitted through such mechanisms as the behaviour of the willy wag-tail, are also still very important to some Ngarrindjeri people.

In this paper I will focus on references to a particular Ngarrindjeri water monster or "bunyip" - the mulgewongk. Accounts of the Ngarrindjeri belief in this being, will be traced from the early days of white arrival in South Australia and through to the present day.

A belief in dangerous beings that inhabit deep water-holes and rivers was widespread amongst Australian Aboriginal cultures. In Northern and Central Australia, according to Aborigines, spirits that have been labelled as rainbow serpents by anthropologists, appear to predominate in water-holes and rivers. However, in South-Eastern Australia the term "bunyip" has been applied to a range of different water dwelling spirits and monsters and they appear to be very different in description from the rainbow serpents. One variety of "bunyip" was described in R. Brough Smyth's The Aborigines of Victoria, as looking very much like an emu. Another version, also appearing in R. Brough Smyth, describes the "bunyip" in a similar way to the visual images provided of the mulgewongk.

In deep water-holes of rivers and in swamps settlers have seen occasionally a creature much resembling the Bun-yip, as it is described by some of the Aborigines. The Advocate of 13th April 1872, quoting the Wagga Wagga Advertiser, says: "A few days ago a Mr. A... driving sheep, camped near Mr. W...'s station at the Midgeon Lagoon, and saw a very fast-swimming beast hastening towards his party. It came within thirty yards, and then stopped when it saw them. It was half as long again as a retriever-dog. The hair all over its body was jet-black, and shining, and very long, say five inches.
Mr. A... says he could not detect any tail. There was too much hair to see its eyes. Its ears were well developed. They had a splendid view of it, for it leisurely surveyed them for half an hour without showing alarm, about thirty yards off, and then turned quietly round and swam away."

In a subsequent issue of the same paper the subject is again referred to: "The Wagga Wagga Express states that 'the Bun-yip' has again been seen twice within the last three months in the waters of Cowal Lake, in March last (1873), by a party of surveyors, whose account can be relied upon, who were out in a boat, and saw the animal about 150 yards off. They describe it to have a head something resembling a human being—or, in their own words, 'like an old man blackfellow, with long dark-coloured hair.'

The mulgewongk has always been described as being covered in dark hair or weed or rushes and human shaped in appearance.

2. Early Accounts of the Mulgewongk

There are a number of references to the mulgewongk in the early literature relating to the Lower Murray area in South Australia. Edward Eyre recorded a belief in a similar being that was held by the Aboriginal group occupying the area slightly further up the River Murray from the Ngarrindjeri.

Another evil agency, dreaded by the natives, is a spirit of the waters, called ngook-wonga, it causes many diseases to those who go into the waters in unauthorised places, or at improper times, hence a native is very loth to go into water he is not accustomed to for the first time.

The Reverend George Taplin established the first mission in Ngarrindjeri territory at Point McLeay in 1859. He wrote a considerable amount about the Ngarrindjeri and there are several references to the mulgewongk in his writings. He, himself, often heard a booming sound that he could not explain, but that the Aborigines attributed to the mulgewongk.

The natives also dread a water spirit, called Mulgewanke. The booming sound which is heard frequently in Lake Alexandrina is ascribed to him, and they think it causes rheumatism to those who hear it. He is represented as a curious being, half man, half fish, and instead of hair, a matted crop of reeds. I have often wondered myself what the noise is really caused by which they ascribe to Mulgewanke. I have heard it dozens of
times, and so have many other persons. It resembles the boom of a distant cannon, or the explosion of a blast. Sometimes, however, it is more like the sound made by the fall of a huge body into deep water. It cannot be the peculiar sound made by the Murray bittern, as I have often heard that too, and it is not at all like the noise in the Lake. At first I ascribed it to people blasting wood on the opposite side, but since then I have been convinced that this cannot be the case. One peculiarity of the sound ascribed to the Mulgewanke is, that although it is sometimes louder than at others, yet it is never near, always distant. I have no doubt but that sometime or other the natural cause of it will be discovered, but I have never yet heard the phenomenon explained.

Taplin also relates one of the Ngarrindjeri stories of a particular incident in Lake Alexandrina involving the mulgewongk.

There is a legend that once upon a time a man’s child was playing on the shore, and he was seized and carried to the bottom of the lake by a Multyewanki. The father tied a line round his waist, got his friends to hold it, and dived in after his boy; but first he performed certain incantations. When he got to the bottom he saw Multyewankis lying asleep in various places, and discovered his child amongst them; so he seized his son, and, giving the signal to his friends, was dragged out, and he and his boy both recovered.

The Ngarrindjeri’s fear of swimming in the lake’s deeper waters because of the mulgewongk’s presence, is also mentioned by Taplin. Although it appears that most stories of the dangers of the mulgewongk relate to the stealing of children and adults don’t seem to be under quite as much threat.

3. Accounts of the Mulgewongk collected in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

The anthropologist Professor R.M. Berndt worked with Aboriginal people from the Lower Murray River in South Australia in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. His main source of information was Albert Karloa, one of the last fully initiated men of the area. In an article published in 1940 Berndt makes two references to the mulgewongk.
He says that the name Mypolonga is a corruption of an
Aboriginal place-name derived from the word mulduwank
(this being Berndt's spelling of the word). Berndt goes
on to say that the mulgewongk,

...is a human and animal-like water
spirit. It lives in dark recesses of the
many caves and shelters scattered along
the banks of the Lower Murray. These
"spirits" are most probably owls. 16

In his second reference Berndt mentions Murungung,
Mason's Hill, as a place which has a story relating to
the mulgewongk associated with it. Berndt may have ob-
tained this story from Mark Wilson another important ini-
tiated Aboriginal from the area.

H.K. Fry also worked with Mark Wilson and he recorded
a version of the mulgewongk story which is probably the one
referred to by Berndt. The following is the complete
version taken from the H.K. Fry papers in the South Australian
Museum:

THE Moolgeawk (Bunyip)

by Mark Wilson

Hundreds of years ago, when the banks of the Lower
Murray and Lake Alexandrina were thickly populated with
aboriginals and even to the time when European settlers
made their appearance, there lurked for the aboriginal
and his tribe a great danger in the waters of the Lower
Murray and eastern shores of Lake Alexandrina. For the
Moolgeawk lived underneath the Red Cliffs known as Pomond,
which was their headquarters. There were also underwater
colonies of them, living in caves under a limestone ridge
about two miles west of Mr. Allan McFarlane's Wellington
Lodge and under the hill at Brinkley's. The Moolgeawk was
the legendary animal about whose origin and subsequent
departure the aboriginals had no information, as they were
still in their haunts during the arrival of the first
European settlers. It is supposed that the paddle steamers,
boats and other traffic caused their destruction. They
were supposed to be shaped in the form of a human being
about two or three feet high, warm blooded and with hair
about two yards long. Their favourite position was on
the shallow waters at the edge of the Lake, where they
would lie submerged with hair floating on the surface of the
waters, to make the aboriginals think it was only one
of the many weeds that grew along the shores of the lake,
and so come near enough to be attacked. No aboriginal
would travel in his canoe near Pomond after sunset.
There was a large camp of aboriginals at Murroongang
(Brinkley's) and the old aboriginals warned their children
to keep a good look out when playing near the water, as the
Moolgeawk would get them.

One day a little boy about eight years of age was
playing with other children at the edge of the water when
he was pulled under by a Moolgeawk. Some of the children
saw him being pulled under, and they ran terrified to their parents and told them what happened, and when the father who was out hunting came home he was told of the occurrence and immediately set about making preparations for his rescue. He got his emu feathers that were wrapped around the kidney fat of a dead body called Ngrnooyee (anaesthetic) and after being rubbed all over - also his waddies - he went to the spot where the little boy disappeared, and diving under the bank he found the passage to the Woolgewauk's home. He crawled up and found them gathered about the little boy. They had a fire and were chanting a corroboree over him, to make him into a Woolgewauk. He then took his emu feathers and shaking them about the entrance it soon penetrated into their midst and caused them all to fall asleep. He then went in, picked up his boy and going back to the river he dived out and soon came to the surface to the great delight of the tribe who chanted songs of his prowess; and rubbed emu and goanna fat all over the body of the little boy. His face eyes and hair showed he was turning into a little Woolgewauk. But after a few days of medical treatment he got back to his normal self and was none the worse for his short capture by the Woolgewauks.6

4. Stories about the Mulgewongk still told today.

Most Ngarrindjeri people that I have spoken to in the last couple of years have known something about the mulgewongk.4 The account that Mark Wilson told to R.K. Fry about mulgewongks at Brinkley seems to be the most commonly told story today. Brinkley, near Wellington on the Lower River Murray, is the place that most Ngarrindjeri people indicate as the spot where mulgewongks are said to live. Brinkley was a major camping place for the Ngarrindjeri people well into this century.

Ngarrindjeri stories relating to the mulgewongk appear to have changed very little from the time of European contact. The danger to children that the mulgewongk presents seems to have always been a common theme in these stories. Children's belief in the existence of a dangerous water monster would have helped to prevent accidental drownings caused by careless frolicking in deep and little known watering spots.

NOTES
1. The spelling I have adopted is based on the way Mulgewongk is pronounced today.
2. Personal discussions with Ngarrindjeri people in the last few years. Ngarrindjeri is the term most favoured by these people today.
3. Ibid., 2.
7. E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery.*......
8. Ibid., 7.
10. Ibid., 9.
11. Ibid., 9, page 138.
12. Ibid., 11.
13. Refer to various stories included in this paper.
14. R. Berndt, "Some Aspects of Jaralde Culture" *Oceania,* XI,
   2 (Dec. 1940), page 164 - 185.
15. Ibid., 14, page 166.
16. Ibid., 15.
17. Ibid., 14, page 168.
18. H.K. Fry, Papers held in S.A. Museum AA105.
19. Ibid., 2.