NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 8th General Meeting of the Society for 1986 will be held in -

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 129 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

on

MONDAY 27TH OCTOBER 1986 AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the Previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous general meeting, held in the Conservation Centre on Monday 22nd September 1986 are attached.

3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals from other societies and organisations received since the last meeting will be tabled.

4. Speaker:
   Betty Ross, a former president of this society will address the society. The subject of her address will be:
   " Conservation and Management of Historic Sites in Contemporary and Ancient China ".

5. Supper will be served at the close of the meeting.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
120 Wakefield St.
ADELAIDE SA 5000
BURIAL CUSTOMS OF THE KAURNA

Tom Gara

In a recent paper on the Tjilbruke legend in this journal, Val Campbell commented upon the burial customs of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains. She pointed out that although the historical accounts of the Adelaide area refer to simple primary interment of the body, there are several indications that the Aborigines further south on the Fleurieu Peninsula sometimes smoke-dried the bodies of their dead. This practice was a characteristic of the Ngarrindjeri from Encounter Bay and Lake Alexandrina and is well-documented in the accounts of Meyer (1846), Taplin (1873, 1879) and other early observers of the Aborigines.

Campbell lists three references to smoke-drying of bodies south of Adelaide. The earliest of these is a painting of an ‘elevated tomb’ seen at Myponga by S. T. Gill, probably in about 1845. The painting clearly shows a wooden platform of the type constructed by the Ngarrindjeri people on which the smoked body was left to desiccate. Although it cannot be certain that the body at Myponga has been smoked, it seems likely this was the case.

The second reference is in the report by Tindale & Mountford (1936) of the excavation of Kongarati Cave near Second Valley. This excavation revealed the body of an elderly female, draped with kangaroo skins and fibre-nets, resting on a bed of grass and marine sponges and covered over with slate slabs. Tindale and Mountford noted that the body had been smoke-dried and showed evidence of charring in several places.

Tindale has also referred briefly to the smoke-drying of the body of an Aboriginal man, the father of Ivaritji, at Morphett Vale. Ivaritji was the last full-blood Kaurna woman and was interviewed by Tindale shortly before her death in 1930. Tindale (1974, p. 55) states that the body “was trussed, rubbed with red ochre, and smoked over a fire” and he added that the body is now in the possession of the Berlin Museum. Ivaritji’s father was known to the early settlers as “Rodney” or “King Rodney” and was often described as a ‘chief’ or ‘leading man’ of the Adelaide tribe. His Aboriginal name was Parnatatya and it appears that he came from the Aldinga - Willunga area. His death probably occurred in the late 1840s or early 1850s.

To illustrate the use of caves as burial places by the Aborigines, Tindale provided an account of the Tjilbruke legend to accompany the report of the Kongarati Cave excavation. According to the legend, obtained from a Lake Alexandrina man, Tjilbruke journeyed north from his own country at Yankalilla when he heard that his nephew had been killed near Adelaide. He collected the body and smoked it on the beach at Marino. He then carried the body south to Cape Jervis where he left it in a cave. It should be noted that the story was obtained from a Ngarrindjeri man and that Tjilbruke himself was not from Adelaide but from the southern end of the peninsula.
Campbell suggests that the practice of smoke-drying the dead was adopted by the southern-most Kauarna groups, influenced by the Lake Alexandrina and Coorong tribes. During some historical research on the Kaurna, I have come across two references to the smoking of the body of the Adelaide Aboriginal man known to the settlers as ‘King John’. The first of these is an account in a book by Jessup called Flindersland and Sturtland, describing the writer’s visit to Australia in 1861-1862. Jessup travelled widely in the eastern colonies and also visited this state, journeying through the Mid North and Flinders Ranges. At Wilpena he met a man named Giles who had settled in the Onkaparinga area in the early years of the colony and who had witnessed King John’s funeral. Other references to smoke-drying provide few details of this practice but Giles’ account gives a detailed description of the process.

King John, whose Aboriginal name was Mullawirraburka, came from the southern plains. Like Rodney, he was often referred to as a chief of the Adelaide tribe. According to Teichelmann and Schurmann, his Aboriginal name was derived from Mullawirra, literally “dry gum forest”, the name for the area on the eastern side of the Aldinga Plain, and the suffix burka. The latter term had the general meaning of “old” or “old man” but when used as a suffix to the name of a district, denoted the rightful “proprietor” of that district. Schurmann noted that there were no chiefs amongst the Aborigines but King John, as a burka, “owned” and “directed” a corroboree 2. Although little is known about Kauarna local and totemic organization, it seems that he was probably a ritual leader, the senior initiated man of one of the Kauarna groups. The notice of King John’s death in the Register on January 6, 1845 stated that he had died at the Native Location in Adelaide, aged about 35. Other members of the tribe had then carried his body to the “neighbourhood of Onkaparinga for the purpose of interment”. Jessop’s informant, Giles, described the subsequent rites:

Like other men, he died, but he was not buried. His body was disembowelled, thoroughly cleansed, and trussed up like a fowl. A triangle was then erected, like that of a gypsy’s fire, from which he was reverently suspended. Over all a tabernacle was made of green boughs and grass, something like a beehive. Beneath the venerated remains, thus shrouded, a slow fire was kindled - so slow as to burn three weeks, and not consume the body, against which calamity every precaution was taken by careful watching day and night... When the body had been duly smoked, and, as far as possible, mummid, the dutiful luBras lower it, wrap it up, and bear it about in turns for three months, to give the poor defunct a last look over his domains. the bounds having been beaten, they return to headquarters, and there, having selected a gum-tree, proper and tall, they set the old man gently and firmly in a fork of the topmost bough. But now he might get cold, for they don’t believe he is dead until he is gone. To prevent this, they build over him a house of twigs, tight and strong; and when they have made him as comfortable as they can, they leave him to his fate.

Later, when Jessop himself visited the Onkaparinga area, he confirmed the details of King John’s smoking with another early settler who had witnessed the process. This man told Jessop that the body was left in the tree for a long time and the remains were then taken down and buried in a grave.
Molineux, speaking at a meeting of the Royal Society of SA in 1879 also referred briefly to King John's funeral: 

After death a number of the tribe put him on a lot of sticks [presumably the wooden “bier” described in other sources], and after smoking him for a considerable time carried him about for nearly a fortnight before the obsequies were finally concluded. During the time there were great lamentations, the “gins” especially making a fearful noise and evincing great distress. 

Jessop's informant attributed King John's elaborate burial rites to his “chieflty” status and Molineux also suggested that King John had been accorded special honour. It is clear that the smoking of bodies was not general practice and it seems likely that King John's burial rites were connected with his status as a ritual elder. Little is known of Rodney, who Tindale said was smoked at Morphett Vale, but the same considerations of status may have been involved in his case.

Campbell suggested that the practice of smoking the dead may have been adopted by the southernmost Kaurna groups, the result of the influence of the Encounter Bay people to the east. The account by Jessop shows that the practice extended further north along the coastal plains, almost as far as Adelaide. Although King John frequented the township of Adelaide, he was from the Onkaparinga - Willunga area and it was to there that his body was returned for the burial rites. The rites themselves - smoking over a slow fire, followed by a lengthy period of desiccation in a tree and final interment in a grave - are nearly identical to those described for the Ngarrindjeri. Historical sources indicate that there was a close relationship between the Adelaide, Rapid Bay and Encounter Bay tribes and that the latter two tribes were frequent visitors to the Adelaide area. It is possible that the Kaurna's adoption of smoke-drying may have been largely a post-contact phenomenon, hastened by the general breakdown of tribal organization and the increasing level of contact between the tribes.

Jessop also referred briefly to an Aboriginal burial ground that he himself saw in Adelaide. It was, he wrote, at a “well-marked spot” in a bend of the river - presumably the River Torrens - on a high bank, and consisted of a huge spherical mound, which no doubt owed its size to the time it had existed. I was tempted very greatly to open it, in order to see the disposition of the bodies, and what other arrangements were made, as also to get some skulls and skeletons. On mentioning, however, the matter to the people, they seemed to desire that the place should not be disturbed (vol. II: p. 51).

Jessop was therefore somewhat annoyed a short time later when he passed the site again and saw several white children playing with some skulls.
FOOTNOTES

1 Ivaritji provided some details on her father and a few recollections of tribal life in an interview in the *Advertiser* on 8/12/1927, p. 13.

2 King John is relatively well-documented in the Government records and newspapers and in the diaries and journals of the early settlers. For discussion of King John and the role of the burka see C. G. Teichelmann & C. W. Schurmann (1840) *Part II* p. 4, 36, 75 and C. W. Scurmann (1840) "The Aborigines of South Australia" in *The South Australian Colonist* March 17, 1840.


REFERENCES


W. R. H. Jessop (1862) *Flindersland and Sturtland; or the Inside and Outside of Australia*, 2 vols, Bentley, London.


G. Taplin (1873) "The Narrinyeri" reprinted in J. D. Woods (1879) *The Native Tribes of South Australia*. E. S. Wigg, Adelaide.

G. Taplin (ed) (1879) *The Folklore, Manners and Languages of South Australian Aborigines*. Gov't Printer, Adelaide.

