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Adam Paterson and Chris Wilson

## **Ngarrindjeri Whaling Narratives and Reconciliation at Encounter Bay, South Australia**

Sealers and whalers were amongst the first newcomers to interact with Aboriginal South Australians. Beginning from around 1803, crews made up of primarily European and American men visited the southern coastline of South Australia and occasionally stayed for several years, establishing permanent settlements on the uninhabited offshore islands. Company records, ledgers, ship logs, and occasionally personal journals and letters provide tantalizing glimpses of the lives of Aboriginal people living in proximity to these seasonal settlements. Little was made of these records until the publication of Rebe Taylor's book *Unearthed*, which documents the abduction of Aboriginal women by sealers and whalers, and their confinement on the islands along Australia's southern coastline. Most of the women whose lives were unearthed by Taylor had come from Tasmania, although some were Ngarrindjeri, a people who lived along the southern Fleurieu Peninsula, Coorong, Lower Murray River, and Lakes region of Southern Australia.

Our work seeks to document Ngarrindjeri contributions to the whaling industry and reflect on colonization in South Australia and its legacy, for Ngarrindjeri and other Australians. We frame our work within the context of reconciliation, a movement aiming to promote and facilitate respect, trust, and positive relationships between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We recognize that writing and disseminating Aboriginal histories has potential to facilitate understanding between Aboriginal and other Australians, contributing symbolically to reconciliation. We also see our work as reconciliation in practice, where Indigenous (Wilson) and non-Indigenous (Paterson) approach the research from different cultural and disciplinary perspectives. Wilson is a descendant of Sustie Wilson, a Ngarrindjeri whaler, and brings Ngarrindjeri perspectives to the work, while Paterson has previously researched aspects of South Australian colonial whaling and brings a knowledge of the industry and its archive. This paper is the first report of our collaboration and we hope to further explore this unique and culturally significant component of our shared history through archaeological investigations with the Ngarrindjeri community.

Many Ngarrindjeri continue to live in and around their traditional lands, while others live further afield and return to *ruwe* (country) and family periodically. Ngarrindjeri people often trace their family histories through European and Ngarrindjeri ancestors. The first unions between Ngarrindjeri and newcomers occurred near the sealing and whaling grounds in the early 1800s. At that time, Ngarrindjeri named the newcomers *Kringkari*, the Ngarrindjeri word for a pink layer of skin revealed by burial practices—an appropriate name for pink-skinned men arriving from Karta (Kangaroo Island), the largest offshore island and a resting place for the souls of the deceased before passing to the spirit world. The newcomers did not behave with appropriate custom—as ancestors might—and unrest and mistrust grew.

When the explorer Captain Charles Sturt traveled in 1829 charting the Murray River, Australia's only major inland river, he noted that the Ngarrindjeri were wary and rarely seen, despite the many signal fires visible in the area. Learning from earlier interactions with *Kringkari*, and perhaps suffering from cultural and social upheaval after decimation by smallpox, they avoided Sturt and his party. Whalers and sealers continued to visit the mainland coast, sometimes establishing seasonal bay-whaling camps and sometimes more permanent settlements. The largest of these was made up of around 20 sealers and whalers on Kangaroo Island. Though the histories of the Kangaroo Islanders have been researched and discussed at some length, the relationships between whalers and Ngarrindjeri at the mainland stations at Encounter Bay are less well known.

### **Initial Meetings at Encounter Bay**

Many of the men and women who formed these relationships remain nameless, and are mentioned in passing by missionaries or doctors who described the overall setting and note the prevalence of white whalers living with Ngarrindjeri women during the whaling season. An exception to these largely anonymous accounts was the relationship between John Driscoll, a whaler, and Popalbe, a Ngarrindjeri woman. Popalbe is named in colonial records because she was questioned in relation to Driscoll's death, allegedly at the hands of her Ngarrindjeri husband, Reppindjeri. According to Popalbe the two men had reached an agreement permitting Driscoll to have intimate relationships with herself and another of Reppindjeri's wives. However, at some point while traveling overland, Driscoll—who was extremely drunk after consuming most of a bottle of rum—overstepped the agreed

terms. Angered by the transgression, Reppindjeri struck him across the face. Driscoll retaliated, swinging the empty rum bottle, though he was overpowered by Reppindjeri who killed him with a blow to the head. Reppindjeri was held in chains on the bark *South Australian* anchored in Encounter Bay, and his condition was recorded in entries in the log by the first mate for several months.

He was never tried, despite the case receiving considerable attention. Reppindjeri's wives were key witnesses and William Wyatt, Protector of Aborigines, was at pains to point out that a trial would be unfair if their testimony was inadmissible. A stumbling block for the colonial authorities was the requirement under British law for witnesses to believe in a Christian God and be sworn in. Reppindjeri, however, relieved them of the burden of reconciling the two worldviews by escaping while being brought overland to Adelaide.

H. E. Mayer, a Lutheran missionary living at Encounter Bay, was deeply concerned by the relationships between Ngarrindjeri women and the whalers. Morally, they did not fit with his Christian values, which he was charged with imparting to the Ngarrindjeri. In addition, he could see the physical harm the whalers were causing the women, as venereal disease ran rife. The colonial surgeon Dr. Wark was also distressed by the spread of disease and in 1840 reported that more than half of the Ngarrindjeri women at Encounter Bay were suffering from syphilis and miscarriage had become commonplace.

While these new relationships and the diseases they brought to the Ngarrindjeri were devastating, the newcomers also brought with them goods of interest to Ngarrindjeri. Whaling stations in South Australia were well supplied with rum, which managers could purchase duty-free and supply as part of the whalers' rations. However, alcohol was not the only prospect that appealed to Ngarrindjeri; some sought employment at the whaling stations where they could earn more than with the missionaries. Mayer believed that the whaler Tammuruwe Nunkauere preferred whaling because he could purchase clothes and dress as the Europeans did. Ngarrindjeri whalers were reported to be among the best whalers in the early years of the colony, and in some years a whole boat's crew was gathered from Ngarrindjeri.

There were several hundred Ngarrindjeri at Encounter Bay during the whaling season, though only a few found employment at the station regularly. Many others harvested the meat from the discarded whale carcasses. Ngarrindjeri had gathered to harvest the bodies

of stranded whales before *Kringkari* arrived in their lands. Runners would be sent inland telling others of the arrival of *Kondoli* (Whale), a powerful *Ngatji* (totem), which was a time for ceremony and trade. The relationship between Ngarrindjeri and their *Ngatji* is very strong, described as being of the same flesh, or closer than the bond between husband and wife. According to Ngarrindjeri creation stories, *Kondoli* was a large and strong man who had the ability to make fire; jealous men speared him in the back of his neck and flames leaped out. *Kondoli* fled to the nearby water to quench his burning wound and became the whale. His wound can still be seen in the spout from the whale's blowhole.

European accounts of Ngarrindjeri eating whale meat were generally critical. They described Ngarrindjeri as ants swarming over the carcass and the meat itself as being “food for blacks, sharks, dogs, and pigs.”<sup>1</sup> Their accounts demonstrate ignorance about Ngarrindjeri custom, which required that ceremonies be performed before whale meat was eaten. The fat was used to bind pigment, the ribs to form shelters, and ear bones to carry water. Ngarrindjeri probably viewed the European practice of discarding 30 or more whale carcasses each year as wasteful, disrespectful, and if the proper ceremonies were not conducted, potentially dangerous. It is not known if Ngarrindjeri tried to continue their ceremonies and practices around the consumption of the whale meat, though if they did not, those whose *Ngatji* was *Kondoli* would have been especially aggrieved.

Ngarrindjeri were adaptable and often sought to find the benefit in the changes brought by the newcomers and their hunts. A man, named Charlie Warner by the whalers and described in a newspaper article as a “Whale Enchanter,” chose to live near the station where he received rations for working as a “watcher” or lookout. According to the reporter, a Ngarrindjeri whaler named Sustie Wilson had explained that Warner had special powers and could sing or chant whales to shore. While the reporter may have recorded the conversations with Sustie faithfully, it is likely that without detailed knowledge of Ngarrindjeri culture and customs, something was lost in translation. To Ngarrindjeri, the “singing” or “chanting” of whales represents knowledge of whale behavior learned through song and held by special people, often elders. From this point of view, Warner was most likely especially knowledgeable about seasonal patterns and local conditions—such as tides and other environmental conditions—as well as whale behavior. It is because of this knowledge that Warner had an uncanny knack of predicting when whales would come

1 *South Australian Register*, 6 September 1879.

into the bays and recognizing when they were agitated and likely to dive or strand, making him an exceptionally talented lookout.

### **Rewriting the Ngarrindjeri History of Whaling**

In developing our narratives of Ngarrindjeri whalers, we actively sought to center Ngarrindjeri in our accounts to identify as many Ngarrindjeri whalers as we could, and to promote their stories and the role that they played in the industry—a role that was obscured by discursive practices that changed as the mode of colonization changed. Europeans, who brought their own cultural biases to their observations, wrote the accounts of whaling and Ngarrindjeri reactions to it. The political and social will to incorporate Aboriginal people into the new colonial society was greatest in the first few decades of the colony, and it was anticipated that this would be achieved through religious instruction and employment. In these early years, newspapers reported enthusiastically on the skill of the Ngarrindjeri whalers. By the 1860s, however, their work was rarely reported. Most histories of South Australian whaling suggest that the industry had ceased at this time and the stations do not appear in the newspapers; however, the letter-books of the “Protector of Aborigines” record around 20 men working at the Encounter Bay station in 1860. It is likely that a marginal industry existed employing Aboriginal men, who had been disenfranchised through the alienation of their land and dissuaded from working in more mainstream industries through lack of payment or other unfair conditions that disadvantaged them over newcomers.

The discursive construction of the work done by the Ngarrindjeri whalers in the later stages of the industry—where it was only noted in Protectors’ records—reflected official attitudes toward Aboriginal Australians, which had changed from optimistic assimilation to, at best, paternalistic care in the 1860s. Another example of the achievements of Ngarrindjeri whalers being overlooked was the white whaler James Long’s omission of the Aboriginal whalers from his 1890s recollections of the industry at Encounter Bay. Long did remember Ngarrindjeri in other ways, for the eating of the meat—for which they were derided—and for camping nearby. Given the clarity of his recollections of almost all aspects of the industry, it is easy to construe Long’s amnesia as racially motivated, an act that was perhaps made easier by the confinement of most Aboriginal people to missions by the 1890s. Long’s recollections contrast with the memories of Sustie Wilson, the

only Ngarrindjeri whaler whose testimony is recorded in the historical archive through a newspaper article. Sustie was interviewed in 1930 when he was reported to be about one hundred years old. Sustie told of the skill of Ngarrindjeri harpooners, of the “power” of Charlie Warner, and described rowing twelve miles (19 kilometers) back to shore after being towed to sea by a whale.

### **Reconciliation through Meaningful Histories**

Recognizing the ways in which narratives of Ngarrindjeri whalers have been variously constructed, and indeed forgotten, are important aspects of this history and need to be shared widely in Australia, a country still coming to terms with the injustices of colonialism. For Ngarrindjeri—as for many Aboriginal peoples from the so-called settled south of Australia—disruption caused by colonization was particularly harsh. Histories such as these provide a bridge to the present and a useful contextual lens for understanding current practices. It also provides opportunities to highlight the strength, creativity, and perseverance of Ngarrindjeri in the past and the present. It is important to recognize that the stories that are told today about Ngarrindjeri and their role in the development of South Australia can easily be colored by past bias. Meaningful engagement with Ngarrindjeri histories and promotion of Ngarrindjeri points of view about shared histories are crucial to improving relationships between Ngarrindjeri and other Australians today.

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