

Kaurna Night Skies

By Paul Curnow [B.Ed]

Before Europeans first came to colonise the Adelaide Plains in 1836, the night skies would have been truly dark by today's standards. There was no street lighting, no security lighting and no industrial pollution to obscure the view of our galaxy. However, within a short period of time of just over 150 years we have managed to create a large metropolis of approximately 1 million people with industries, communities and lots of street lighting. Although, Adelaide's skies are still quite good by world standards this light pollution has managed to obscure the faint light, which has often been travelling for aeons from reaching the Earth and the Adelaide Plains.

Sadly few people now give thought to the original inhabitants of Adelaide Plains the Kaurna People. Before European occupation, the Kaurna (pronounced gar-na) had been living on the Adelaide Plains for thousands of years. They were comprised of a number of different clan groups who were united by a common language. According to records the Kaurna lived as far north as Port Wakefield near the coast and inland to Crystal Brook, and as far south as Victor Harbor (note: many Kaurna and their descendants still live in the Adelaide region). Their traditional boundary to the east is the Adelaide foothills and to the west the Adelaide coastline. The Kaurna were bordered by the Peramangk People in the Mount Lofty Ranges to the east, by the Ngarrindjeri and Ramindjeri Peoples to the southeast and by the Ngadjuri People to the north.

There were 650 Kaurna People on the South Australian Register in 1842. However, before Europeans began the occupation of the Adelaide area on mass in 1836, many of the diseases of the west which had been brought by the convicts and colonists from Europe were to decimate many Indigenous Australian populations. For example, it is believed that through the interaction of Aboriginal Groups in the eastern states with invading Europeans that many diseases such as smallpox had migrated down through the Murray-Darling Aboriginal Nations who unwittingly spread the disease. Once Europeans first started arriving at Holdfast Bay many of these diseases had already impacted upon the Kaurna People, therefore, it is hard to say with certainty how many Kaurna People may have already fallen to these pathogens.

The Kaurna People still occupy the Adelaide Plains. However, over time, and through brutal government policies they were displaced and moved on to other lands. Resurgence and interest in Kaurna Culture has recently been taking place, as it has been for many other Aboriginal Cultures around Australia. For example, similar to the nomenclature now used in the Northern Territory where Ayers Rock is usually called *Uluru*, many notable Adelaide place names now share dual naming. For example, the River Torrens is now also known as Karrawirraparri (*karra*=Red Gum, *wirra*=forest and *parri*=river).

Today, because of the endeavours of a few thoughtful individuals about 3,500+ words of the Kaurna language survive. Unfortunately, little is now known of the astronomy and cosmological beliefs of the Kaurna. However, these same people responsible for the recording of Kaurna linguistics also documented snippets of Kaurna knowledge of the night sky in addition to their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

Most notable of these recorders were two Lutheran missionaries who had arrived from Germany in the colony in 1838. Clamor Schürmann and Christian Teichelmann had come to Adelaide fleeing the religious persecutions of their homeland in the interest of greater freedom and converting the local Anglo and Indigenous populations to their own faith. Schürmann and Teichelmann established the first 'native school', as it was then called, on the banks of the River Torrens *Karrawirraparri* at a place that is known as *Piltawodli*, which means 'possum's house'. It is here that the two missionaries likely recorded some of the Kurna cosmological beliefs.

Somewhat similar to some ancient Egyptian beliefs, the Kurna believed that celestial bodies such as the stars formally lived on the earth. They believed that while on the earth these celestial bodies lived their lives partly as men, and partly as animals. Eventually, they exchanged this existence for a higher level and ventured into the heavens. Thus, the Kurna applied names given to beings on the earth to celestial objects and there was a close connection between the lower and upper realms of existence.

In many ancient and primeval cultures the sun is nearly always seen as male and the moon is viewed as female. For example, to the ancient Greeks the sun was the god Helios who daily drove his fiery chariot across the sky westward and the moon was the goddess Selene. In addition, in ancient Egypt the sun was known as the supreme god *Ra* and to the Aztecs of Mexico as *Huitzilopochtli* both male deities. However, in many but not all Aboriginal Australian cultures, our sun is often viewed as female and the moon as male. For the Kurna People this is also the case. The Kurna called the sun *Tindo* and the moon was named *Kakirra*. Although, Wyatt (1879) claims that *Kakirra* is male, not female. When the moon was full it was called *Kakirramunto*. *Kakirra* was believed to have a benevolent affect on human affairs, however, *Tindo* (sometimes written as *Teendo*) was considered to be more malevolent in nature.

Accordingly during the hours of darkness the Kurna believe that *Tindo* sat in her *Wodli* (wurley) and ate fish. Furthermore, the Kurna People believe that *Tindo* was originally created by an ancestral being named *Monaincherloo*, who was also known by the name *Teendo yerle* which meant 'sunfather'. Wyatt (1879) had recorded that the Kurna believed that *Teendo yerle* had created the sun, moon, stars, men and "plenty of things."

The Kurna called the constellation of Orion *Tiinninyarra* (also sometimes written as *Tiinninyarrana*), and the *Tiinninyarra* are a group of young men who are hunting emu, kangaroo and other game of the celestial plain known as the *Womma*. They are hunting this game by the banks of a river, which they called *Wodliparri* (*wodli*=hut and *parri*=river). Therefore the band of the Milky Way from the Southern Cross through to the constellations of Orion, Auriga and Taurus is seen as a giant river in the sky world, and along the edge of the river are reeds and huts. Neighbours of the Kurna to the south the Ramindjeri People who live around the Encounter Bay area also saw the band of the Milky Way as a river in the sky world with huts along the edge.

Additionally, along the edge of the *Wodliparri*, a group of women are collecting reeds and berries and they are known as the *Mankamankarrana* who many astronomers

know today as the 'Seven Sisters' or the 'Pleiades' cluster. The Pleiades are an open cluster of stars which formed approximately 50-60 million years ago and are located some 378 light years away from our sun.

In addition, the dark patches along the band of the Milky Way are known as *Yurakauwe* (*yura*=monster or magnificent creature and *kauwe*=water). These dark patches are seen as waterholes, lagoons and billabongs where a very dangerous 'being' is said to reside. The Kurna believe that if you were to wander too close to - or swim in these areas you would be dragged down under the water and killed by this creature.

Prominent in the skies of Australia is the majestic Wedged-tailed Eagle *Aquila Audax*. Eagles and other Australian Birds feature strongly in many stories told by Indigenous Australians and the Kurna have an eagle constellation known as *Wilto*. Unfortunately, there do not seem to be ethnographical recordings of which particular stars that the constellation of *Wilto* was comprised. However, I personally believe the Kurna were referring to the Southern Cross as *Wilto*. I have a number of reasons for believing this.

The Ngadjuri People who lived in the Barossa Valley and Clare Valley region north of the Kurna People had a constellation they called *Wildu*. The Ngadjuri People viewed the Southern Cross as the footprint of the Wedge-tailed eagle *Wildu*. Furthermore, there are many words that are similar in the Ngadjuri and Kurna languages in addition to some similar stories. To me, *Wildu* and *Wilto* are very similar in sound and they both refer to an eagle. Furthermore, one needs to be mindful that the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia did not use a written language, so many of these names have been recorded by early ethnographers who often spelt the word the way it sounded to them.

Accordingly, as we journey further north through the different Aboriginal Groups in South Australia other peoples also saw the Southern Cross as a Wedge-tailed eagle. Like the Ngadjuri People, the Adnyamathanha People of the Flinders Ranges also called the Southern Cross *Wildu* and it was seen as the footprint of the Wedged-tailed Eagle *Aquila Audax*. In addition, the Aranda People who come from the far north of our state and part of the Northern Territory saw the Southern Cross as a Wedged-tailed Eagle that they called *Waluwara*. The two pointer stars alpha and beta Centauri are his throwing stick and the Coalsack Nebula is his nest in the sky. The four brightest stars in the Southern Cross are *Waluwara's* talons.

The Aboriginal Groups of Australia shared a close relationship with their environment and the natural world for 45,000+ years. Today we are left with just a taste, of the incredibly complex knowledge and understandings that the Kurna People and other Aboriginal Peoples of Australia have developed over these thousands of years. This early drive to understand the night sky still fires the passions of many contemporary astronomers. Hopefully, efforts will continue to preserve these remaining snippets of stellar knowledge for future generations of Indigenous descendants and night sky enthusiasts.

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Fig 1: Kurna Dancers at the South Australian Museum.



Fig 2: Kurna Elder Steve Goldsmith.



Fig 3: (from left) Jamie Goldsmith, Steve Goldsmith, Paul Curnow and Karl Telfer.