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THE ABORIGINES' FRIENDS' ASSOCIATION

AND

THE NGARRINDJERI PEOPLE

by

GRAHAM JENKIN

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THE ABORIGINES' FRIENDS' ASSOCIATION AND THE NGARRINDJERI  
PEOPLE.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Graham Keith Jenkin B.A. Dip.T.

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## SYNOPSIS

One of the major problems facing the student of Aboriginal history lies in the fact that most of the source material has been written by people who are not Aborigines; and quite a lot of it comprises the records of Europeans who had very little knowledge of Aborigines, or were antagonistic towards them, or both. The scholar is thus compelled to do more 'reading between the lines' and interpretation in this field than in most others. I have attempted to overcome the problem in several ways — for instance by compiling a series of tape-recorded interviews, mainly with elderly people. But even the oldest memories do not go back much beyond the Great War — and that is where this particular thesis ends.

The Ngarrindjeri are distinctive in many ways, and one of the distinctive features of their modern history is the relationship which developed between their nation and the Aborigines' Friends' Association. It is this relationship which enables the historian to study the Ngarrindjeri in much greater depth and detail, over a longer period of time than is possible in the case of any other South Australian Aborigines. The Ngarrindjeri were practically the sole concern of the A.F.A. for nearly sixty years, and over this period of time, the records of the Association provide a wealth of information regarding the people that it originally set out to help. These records do not overcome the basic problem previously mentioned: that is, that the information is mostly from non-Aboriginal sources. Yet it seems to me to be a very useful second-best. It is pointless bemoaning the fact that a start was not made fifty years ago in collecting the Ngarrindjeri side of the

story (as a number of people have told me I should have done!). We can only work with the material which we have to hand. And by combining the A.F.A. records with other sources, such as newspapers, government records, books, and various archival documents, as well as the small amount of truly Ngarrindjeri material which has survived, it is possible to piece together at least a part of the jig-saw of modern Ngarrindjeri history.

The central figure in the thesis is not a Ngarrindjeri man, but the first and most outstanding missionary agent of the A.F.A.: namely, George Taplin. There are two reasons why this should be so. Firstly, it is regrettable but true, that when a group of people are dispossessed, rendered poverty-stricken, and are completely at the mercy of another group, the most important people in their lives are not their own leaders, but those representatives of their conquerors who are put in command over them. It was thus that Taplin, by reason of the power that was vested in him, played the leading role in Ngarrindjeri history for two decades: despite the fact that it was during this period that some of the most brilliant Ngarrindjeri leaders arose. The situation is parallel to that of a prisoner-of-war camp: their own leaders may be quite influential in affecting the well-being of the prisoners — but not nearly as influential as the commandant.

The second reason why George Taplin must occupy such a prominent place in modern Ngarrindjeri history, is that he has told us much more about the Ngarrindjeri than all other writers put together; and paradoxical though it may be, the best way to study the Ngarrindjeri during the period 1859-1879 is by studying Taplin: no other source gives us anything like the insights contained in Taplin's

Journals and other writings.

Although Ngarrindjeri history is quite different from that of any other group of Aborigines, its study nevertheless provides ample evidence upon which to base some conclusions regarding Aborigines in general. One of these is that it is apparently not difficult for a highly cultured people to appreciate and to master the high culture of another civilization, if they so desire — no matter how different the two cultures may be. Just as certain members of the Indian aristocracy seemed to experience no difficulty in embracing British high-culture, and fitted in quite felicitously at English universities etc., so too, in the early days of European settlement, when the Ngarrindjeri were still a highly cultivated people, those who wished to master English, and to enter into the culture of the Europeans, seemed to do so with ease. The step across from one high culture to another is obviously small compared with the steps needed to be taken by those people in more recent times who have inherited none, or very little, of the old culture, but who find themselves at the very bottom of the European social and cultural ladder.

Ngarrindjeri history also demonstrates clearly the paradox caused by the growth of racism throughout the nineteenth century. As the Ngarrindjeri became increasingly Europeanized, both culturally and racially, the prejudice against Aborigines also increased; so that even when, by the close of the century, there were a number of Ngarrindjeri people who towered above the majority of Europeans in the various fields of European culture, they were still not accepted into the mainstream of Euro-Australian society. The assimilationist philosophy of the early European administrators and missionaries was based upon the belief that European civilization was superior, but



that people were basically the same. Assimilation simply would not make sense if this were not held as a basic assumption. Yet seventy years later, when most of the Ngarrindjeri were more European than Aboriginal, doubts were being cast as to whether they could even be classed as human beings. Thus we find that the modern history of the Ngarrindjeri traces a parabola, as the people become increasingly European-cultivated until the apogee is reached in the 1890's and the first years of the present century. Unfortunately for the Ngarrindjeri, this high-point coincided with the nadir reached by the graph of white-racism; and it became apparent to many of the people that their position was a hopeless one. Non-acceptance and increasing discrimination must have led even the most fervent optimist to believe that the only path from then on, was a downwards one.

This Thesis is principally concerned with the relationship between the A.F.A. and the Ngarrindjeri: it is by studying this relationship that we are enabled to observe the ascent of the Europeanized Ngarrindjeri, and the beginning of the decline.