

## Chapter Ten

### Hindmarsh Island and the Fabrication of Aboriginal Mythology

Dr Geoffrey Partington

“Women’s business” of various sorts was very common among Aboriginal groups: indeed, initiation rituals at puberty are almost universal among hunter-gatherers in every continent. To demonstrate the existence of such practices and related beliefs is in no way sufficient to establish the existence of “women’s business” of the kind Doreen Kartinyeri claimed in 1994 existed in Hindmarsh Island.

Even though they generally held that their beliefs had remained unchanged since the Dreamtime, and though their way of life has often been regarded as the archetype of the “closed society”, some Aboriginal groups changed their myths over the generations. The dingo was adopted as a totem animal by many Aboriginal groups and has a prominent role in many Dreamtime myths, but dingoes entered Australia long after the first Aborigines.<sup>1</sup> By 1852 the Ngarrindjeri story of the Pleiades told of seven men smoking tobacco. More recently, a clan on the Glynde River in Arnhem Land adopted a square-faced green liquor bottle as a totemic symbol.<sup>2</sup> After a mullock of copper rubble was formed by 19th Century mining on their traditional lands, the Ngulugwongga people became known as Mulluk Mulluk.

Some changes in myth and tradition had obvious political value. The Gunwinggu people became the dominant group at Oenpelli only in the 1950s, but they quickly established Dreamtime links with their new territory.<sup>3</sup> When the Parlamanyin of the Northern Territory died out as a separate group, the Kungarakany quickly laid claim to Parlamanyin territories and myths. When the Maranunngu found that there was rich potential value in lands to the north of their traditional territories, they rapidly made new land claims, backed by the assertion that they were familiar with the mythic lore of the northerly area.<sup>4</sup>

The rapidity with which myths can gain credence was demonstrated by the late Kenneth Maddock’s study of six Aboriginal myths collected during the last forty years about the visit of James Cook to Australia.<sup>5</sup> In the Victoria River myth, the first white arrival was Ned Kelly. Ned was kind and gave the Aborigines horses and bullocks, but Cook came along, killed Ned and despoiled the Aborigines. There seems no doubt that the Aboriginal informants considered such manifestly mistaken accounts of relatively recent events to be historically factual.

#### **The Hindmarsh Island bridge**

In 1984 Binalong Pty Ltd, controlled by Tom and Wendy Chapman, began work on what they hoped would become a major marina complex on Hindmarsh Island. Their preparation seemed meticulous and environmentally friendly. The chairman of the Conservation Council of South Australia asserted that the Hindmarsh Island development was a model of how to proceed. The ALP government of John Bannon supported the project enthusiastically, but made it a condition for building the marina that a bridge be built to connect Hindmarsh Island to the mainland at Goolwa, so as to prevent interminable delays on the existing ferry if and when the marina and other developments were completed.

The first opponents of the marina, and then the bridge, included retired persons and people with holiday homes on the island, and environmentalists concerned about nesting grounds for birds, migration of feral animals, rabbit infestation, and pollution effects on the Coorong and Lower Murray. Their ranks came to include prominent SA Liberals, such as Ian McLachlan, Dean Brown, Michael Armitage, Legh Davis and Diana Laidlaw, as well as Greenpeace, the Australian Democrats, and union militants such as Davey Thomason of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

Aborigines were absent from the early ranks of the opponents. The Chapmans were anxious that all known Aborigines in the area should be consulted, but this was by no means easy, since none had lived on Hindmarsh Island for many years. The Chapmans commissioned Dr Rod Lucas to investigate possible Aboriginal sites of significance. Dr Lucas reported in 1990 that there were no recorded mythological sites specific to Hindmarsh Island. This statement proved later to be an embarrassment to Dr Lucas when his wife, Dr Deane Fergie, became a central figure in Hindmarsh Island disputes.

Dr Lucas advised the Chapmans in 1990 that, like Norman Tindale in the 1930s and Catherine and Ronald Berndt during the 1940s and 1950s, he had found it difficult to construct genealogies and thus to know who should be regarded as traditional custodians of any Aboriginal sites there might be. His report recommended the Chapmans to “consult directly with the relevant Aboriginal representative bodies identified herein, and with any other Aboriginal persons chosen by these bodies”.

The Chapmans consulted Henry Rankine and George Trevorror, leading figures of the Raukkan (once Port McLeay) Community Council, the Coorong Consultative Committee, and the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association. George Trevorror and Henry Rankine both knew considerable Ngurunderi lore. When controversies about the marina and bridge first arose, they made no objections on grounds of traditional beliefs or practices. Nor did Jean Rankine, Henry’s wife, described later by Professor Cheryl Saunders as a “senior Ngarrindjeri woman”. Nor did any members of the Campbell clan, who claimed to be the traditional owners or custodians.

Commissioned by the South Australian Department of Environment and Planning, Dr Vanessa Edmonds reported no evidence of any Ngarrindjeri or other Aboriginal beliefs about Hindmarsh Island, although she identified middens and burial places, which the Chapmans were very willing to protect, even though no Aboriginal interest had been shown in them in living memory. Dr Neale Draper, a senior archaeologist in the SA Department of Aboriginal Affairs, also found no Aboriginal burial sites or other cultural associations of sufficient importance to warrant a ban on a bridge rather than the barrages. His department gave the go-ahead to the contractors for the bridge.

Frustrated by the apparent progress of the marina and plans for a bridge, one local opponent, Bill Longworth, suggested to Davey Thomason, “Let’s see if we can get some Aborigines down from Murray Bridge to help us with our cause”. During 1993 Sally Francis, an ardent conservationist with a weekend shack on Hindmarsh Island, persuaded George Trevorror and Henry Rankine to join the coalition. Subsequently, both men denied that they had been consulted by the Chapmans about their plans, and George Trevorror spread false rumours that the Chapmans had carted away “truckloads of Aboriginal bones”, and that a Goolwa taxi driver had boasted of having a “boot load of boong bones”.

A newly formed Lower Murray Aboriginal Heritage Committee (LMAHC), with George Trevorror as Chairman and Doug Miler as Secretary, now declared that Hindmarsh Island had a sacred shape and a “spiritual character” that would suffer fatally if it were joined to the mainland. Next they decided that the proposed bridge might interfere with the “meeting of the waters”, salt sea water and fresh Murray water. As yet, however, they made no reference to “women’s business” in or near Hindmarsh Island.

The distinctively male Ngurunderi was the central figure in traditional Ngarrindjeri lore. Among other feats Ngurunderi had pursued and killed a gigantic Murray Cod with a spear, which may have been his phallus, and he created the Murray from his own urine, possibly supplemented by that of his wives. In another story his wives were disobedient and ate some bream, a fish forbidden to women. Ngurunderi was obliged to take revenge on his wives: they were drowned and became islands. These stories may not have seemed a promising basis for “women’s business”.

One anthropological source for Ngarrindjeri traditions, generally regarded after its publication in 1993 as highly authoritative, was *The World That Was: The Yaraldi of the Murray River and the Lakes, South Australia* by Ronald and Catherine Berndt. The Berndts were told by the Ngarrindjeri that the River

Murray was to them “like a lifeline, an immense artery of a living body”. The body was “symbolic of Ngurunderi himself”.<sup>6</sup> However, the Berndts gave no hints of significant “women’s business” connected with Hindmarsh Island or Goolwa. One index entry is: “secret-sacred issues, absence of”.

Steve Hemming of the South Australian Museum claimed in late August, 1994, in the presence of his colleagues Philip Jones and Philip Clarke, that Ronald Berndt had said the Lower Murray region bore some resemblance in Ngarrindjeri mythology to a woman’s body. Clarke and Jones denied this claim and asked Hemming to provide a reference to substantiate it, but he could not do so.

In 1989 Peggy Brock edited a book entitled *Women: Rites and Sites: Aboriginal women’s cultural knowledge*, which contained contributions by female anthropologists such as Catherine Berndt, Catherine Ellis and Linda Barwick, Helen Payne, Jen Gibson, Jane Jacobs, Luise Hercus and Fay Gale, who have scholarly interests in South Australian sites important to Aboriginal women. Several sites in South Australia are named in these essays as having special spiritual significance for Aboriginal women, but none in or around Hindmarsh Island or Goolwa.

### **The Jacobs Report**

The Liberal government formed after the 1993 State elections was keen to scrap the bridge, but previous ALP governments had entered into contractual obligations, disregard of which might cost more than the bridge itself. Samuel Jacobs, QC, a retired judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia, was commissioned to make an inquiry. He confirmed the new government’s worst financial fears, so that the decision was made to proceed with building the bridge. Samuel Jacobs wondered why Trevorrow and Milera had not raised their concerns about the shape of Hindmarsh Island earlier, and why it would suffer more if joined to the mainland by a bridge rather than by a ferry. Judge Jacobs was unimpressed by Dr Neale Draper, who criticised the shortcomings of earlier investigations, several of which he had himself conducted, and who raised totally new concerns about the spiritual character of Hindmarsh Island.

### **Enter Sarah Milera and Lindy Warrell**

As Cheryl Professor Saunders noted of events up till 1993, “the Aboriginal women still had not been involved at this stage”.<sup>7</sup> The first women to enter the drama were Sarah Milera, wife of Doug, and Linda Warrell. The Mileras were brought up from Murray Bridge to help the anti-bridge campaign. They were recruited by union officials and offered a house on Hindmarsh Island by anti-bridge campaigner Ann Lucas.

Sarah Milera knew little about Hindmarsh Island to start with, but began to remedy that deficiency by reading the Berndts’ 1993 *The World That Was*. “Women’s business” of various sorts was, of course, very common among several Aboriginal groups, and some in the north of South Australia had been studied by archaeologist Linda Warrell. She visited the bridge campaigners on 26 March, 1994. Lindy Warrell said to Aborigines Tom and Ellen Trevorrow, “It would be nice if there were some women’s business”.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Onkaparinga**

In 1992, following disputes about building a marina at Sellicks Beach, Lewis O’Brien, a Kurna Aborigine, and G Williams claimed that the mouth of the Onkaparinga River was an Aboriginal women’s site. They suggested that a phrase used by German scholars Teichelmann and Schurmann in their 1840 dictionary of the Kurna language was evidence that “the Kurna people talked about body parts”. They concluded that Aborigines could identify the internal sexual organs of women and had noted their similarity to the Onkaparinga estuary.<sup>9</sup>

The Kurna (Adelaide Plains) Aborigines are an entirely separate group from the Ngarrindjeri, but this was probably the start of “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island. At a gathering of leading men in

the LMAHC, Chairman Victor Wilson showed Secretary Doug Milera an aerial photograph of Hindmarsh Island and said, “This is a woman, it’s a creation of the Ngarrindjeri people and I’m going to Doreen Kartinyeri to explain it and to find out about it”.<sup>10</sup> Wilson and Milera had been involved in the Onkaparinga dispute and were able to apply the vagina/river mouth analogy to the Murray mouth and Hindmarsh Island.

The article was in one important respect, however, damaging to later claims about “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island, since the beliefs asserted about the Onkaparinga were not regarded as secret. The maps of the Onkaparinga estuary and mouth, provided by courtesy of the Adelaide Street Directory and the South Australian Education Department, were of the very same kind which opponents of the bridge claimed later would be a sacrilege to display in public, as well as threatening to Ngarrindjeri women, physically and spiritually. Furthermore, any such belief associated with Hindmarsh Island would have been used openly by opponents of the Bridge long before June, 1994, just as Mr O’Brien did during the Onkaparinga dispute.

### **Enter Cheryl Saunders**

When Professor Cheryl Saunders, of the Centre for Comparative Constitutional Studies, University of Melbourne, was appointed by Robert Tickner in 1994 to inquire into “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island, authorities she took as guidelines included:

1. Menham, who wrote in his report to the federal government on the old Swan Brewery area in Perth:  
“It is in my view sufficient to report to the Minister on whether the area is of significance to Aboriginal people in accordance with their traditions and to report on the evidence that touches upon the degree and intensity of belief and feeling that exists in relation to the area under discussion”.<sup>11</sup>
2. Mr Justice Brennan, in *Commonwealth v. Tasmania*, the *Tasmanian Dams’ Case*:  
“The phrase ‘particular significance’ in section 8 cannot be precisely defined. All that can be said is that the site must be of a significance which is neither minimal nor ephemeral, and that the significance may be found by the Aboriginal people in their history, in their religion or their spiritual beliefs or in their culture. A group of whatever size who, having a common Aboriginal biological history, find the site to be of that significance are the relevant people of the Aboriginal race for whom the law is made”.
3. Hon J H Wootton’s report on the proposed Junction Waterhole dam in Alice Springs:  
“The Act does not specify that any degree of antiquity must attach to the observances, customs and beliefs, which may obviously change over time, although the word ‘tradition’ in its ordinary meaning carried the notion of being handed down from generation to generation”.<sup>12</sup>

Evidently, all that Professor Saunders needed to find was a “degree of intensity of belief”. This was rapidly generated, and of some significance, even if not very “particular”. The “ordinary meaning” of “tradition” could safely be disregarded and the term extended to cover claims never made until very recently. Two or three sincere believers, of an approved type, might be enough to determine State or federal legislation.

The Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement appointed Dr Fergie, a lecturer in the University of Adelaide and a friend and colleague of Doreen Kartinyeri, to act as a “facilitator” to support and advise the Aboriginal women objectors in their dealings with Professor Saunders.<sup>13</sup> Although she had no special knowledge of the Ngarrindjeri, Dr Fergie was an ideal choice. She had submitted her doctoral thesis with the injunction that it was never to fall into the hands of men, and had become well known as a champion of gender exclusivity, by the 1990s a most desirable attribute in an anthropologist. Dr Fergie was accepted by Professor Saunders as an authoritative interpreter of Ngarrindjeri culture and traditions,

although Judge Stevens found in her Royal Commission report:

“Without any prior knowledge of historical or contemporary Ngarrindjeri culture, or of the significance ascribed by Doreen Kartinyeri to the area, Dr Fergie was at a serious disadvantage in making any assessment of the group of women present at Graham’s Castle on 19 June, 1994. Any inferences or conclusions drawn from her observations of the women and their interaction are necessarily unreliable”.<sup>14</sup>

Without consulting expert opinion in the Museum of South Australia other than that of Dr Deane Fergie, or checking whether the sources of traditional lore Doreen Kartinyeri assured her were authentic and unimpeachable, Professor Saunders soon recommended to Mr Tickner, who was anxious to hear just such a recommendation, that a complete and final stop be put to any bridge from Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island.

### **Findings of the 1995 Royal Commission**

The findings of the 1995 Royal Commission were diametrically opposed to the recommendations of Professor Saunders. Judge Iris Stevens’ principal findings were that there was “no suggestion” of “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island before 1993, and that these beliefs had been concocted in order to persuade the federal government to ban the Hindmarsh Island Bridge.<sup>15</sup> She was handicapped by the refusal of all but one of the Ngarrindjeri women opponents of the bridge to testify, and by the placement by Doreen Kartinyeri and Deane Fergie of their principal claims in sealed envelopes, later wantonly destroyed. However, Judge Stevens decided that:

“Notwithstanding the lack of direct evidence relating to the more particular description of the ‘women’s business’ contained in the Confidential Appendices, there has been a body of evidence out of which it has been possible to infer their contents”.<sup>16</sup>

As far as I know, no one has ever challenged that the “women’s business” in the envelopes claimed that:

1. Hindmarsh Island had been used during the 19th Century by Ngarrindjeri women as a place for aborting fetuses.
2. The Ngarrindjeri over many generations believed that the Lower Murray was shaped like a woman’s internal sexual organs and had thus regarded it as sacred to women.
3. Building a bridge, as distinct from barrages or ferry ramps, between Goolwa and Hindmarsh Island would interrupt the “meeting of the waters” and destroy the fertility and perhaps the entire existence of the Ngarrindjeri people.

### **The Matthews Inquiry**

Almost as soon as the Royal Commission Report was published, the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement applied to Robert Tickner for a further order to prevent the Hindmarsh Island bridge from being built. This he granted, and appointed Justice Jane Matthews of the Federal Court to carry out an Inquiry.

Among evidence Justice Matthews found significant was that of George Trevorrow, who attributed great spiritual importance to the *ngatji*, defined by him before the Royal Commission as “each clan group’s symbolic totem”. He claimed that if the “totem area” were to be upset, “the place where these things breed, where they live, where they feed, all those things... you are upsetting everybody”.<sup>17</sup> Trevorrow had then declined to link the *ngatji* to women or “women’s business”, but in her final report to Minister Herron in June, 1996 Her Honour suggested that one of the reasons for the cultural significance of the Goolwa channel was as the breeding ground for *ngatji*. She seemed to derive comfort from the thought that the *ngatji* would still breed even if the bridge were built.<sup>18</sup>

Daisy Rankine testified to Justice Matthews about the *mulyewongk* (sea monster) stories, which have long been recognised as part of Ngarrindjeri myth. Daisy told of a child that was taken by a shark

because her parents were lazy and negligent. In their search for the child, the parents entered the land of a hostile clan and were in danger. To save themselves, they transformed their shapes. The mother, transformed into a sea monster, sucked in the sea and opened the Murray, so that salt water and fresh water were mixed together.

Daisy Rankine added to earlier versions that had been recorded. She explained that the female *mulyewongk*, after creating the Murray Mouth, had sunk to the ocean-bed and “still lies there in the Goolwa channel where her child was taken, right under where the bridge would be built”.<sup>19</sup> Justice Matthews told Senator Herron that if Daisy’s *mulyewongk* story was really part of Ngarrindjeri tradition, that alone would make the Goolwa channel significant to Aboriginal heritage and might be enough to order a permanent ban on the bridge.

A few years later Daisy Rankine told American feminist anthropologist Diane Bell that two of her great-grandmothers, Louisa Karpeny and Pinkie Mack, were sorcerers and could brew a *muldarpi*, a spell that for maximum effectiveness needed hair, bones, and a bit of rag or pair of pants.<sup>20</sup> Whether this information would have strengthened or weakened Her Honour’s confidence in Daisy Rankine I cannot say.

By this time of the Matthews Inquiry, Simons tells us:

“.....to those in the know it was now clear that the answer to the injury and desecration question – the reason why nothing must lie between the sky and the water – lay in the secret women’s business and the story of the Seven Sisters”.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, these could not be submitted to Judge Matthews. A Coalition Government had won office in Canberra, and the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement demanded that the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator John Herron, should appoint a female substitute to consider any reports relating to secret women’s business at Hindmarsh Island. Senator Herron declined to abandon his constitutional responsibility.

Then, before Justice Matthews had submitted her report, the full Federal Court delivered its judgement in the crocodile farm case, and confirmed that natural justice required that confidential material deemed relevant to a case under the federal *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Act* must be made available to developers and other interested parties. The Ngarrindjeri objectors decided to withdraw most of their evidence, including that relating to the Seven Sisters. Since, according to Justice von Doussa, there was no mention in Deane Fergie’s sealed envelopes of the Seven Sisters, the current claim by Margaret Simons, Diane Bell and others that the Seven Sisters myth is the very heart of the case against a bridge at Hindmarsh Island provides an outstanding example of dramatic shift in appeal to mythology.

### **Justice von Doussa**

Justice von Doussa presided in 2001 over a case for damages brought by the Chapmans. He extended his inquiry to include allegations that the women’s business at Hindmarsh Island had been concocted. He criticised the Chapmans for their “high level of anger, hostility and suspicion which is borne by them against those who have played a role in events which have frustrated their ambitions”. The Chapmans, he found, also “displayed a lack of objectivity”.

The Chapmans had planned a marina on Hindmarsh Island, had been forced by the Bannon ALP government, as a condition of its approval, to bear most of the costs of a bridge, had their financial backing withdrawn by Westpac after Aboriginal organisations had threatened to withdraw all their funds from that bank, had been bankrupted, and had to sell their home and to live in a shed in the garden of one of their children. What had the Chapmans to be angry and suspicious about?

His Honour was very wrathful, too, with Ron Brunton, who had referred to Judge Stevens' findings as though they were "facts", whereas, His Honour explained, they were only "value judgements based on evidence led before a particular tribunal, and reached in the absence of other material that was then, or has since become, available". His Honour might well have mentioned that the reason the information supposedly available to Doreen Kartinyeri was not presented to the Royal Commission was that the lady and her allies refused to appear before it. I hope that His Honour will regard his own comments merely as "value judgements" made in "a particular tribunal", rather than "facts" that no prudent person who seeks to avoid contempt proceedings would ever seek to contest.

His Honour was less severe on Doreen Kartinyeri, who consented to appear before him, as she had before Justice Matthews. His Honour observed that, "at times her emotions were patent, and she reacted in an angry manner. But if she has been wrongly labelled as a fabricator these responses are understandable".

Obviously a culturally sensitive man, His Honour decided not to submit Doreen Kartinyeri to questions about the contents of the sealed envelopes, but she revealed that "part of the story of Hindmarsh Island is about the area being part of a woman's body". He was confident that a sufficient account of the content of the envelopes could be secured by questioning Doreen Kartinyeri's white female allies: Cheryl Saunders and her assistant Anne Mullins, Deane Fergie and former Tickner staff assistant Susan Kee. What these ladies told him was sealed up in its turn and as yet has not been made public. He regretted that the "original envelopes" containing "women's business" had been destroyed some years earlier, and felt it would be helpful if he knew what their contents had been. Did he ask all who appeared before him how and why they were destroyed?

Mr Justice von Doussa was not convinced that "women's business" had been fabricated. He advised that he had found four planks on which the Royal Commission had erected that finding, and he rejected each of them. Let us consider them in turn.

1. *Alleged late disclosure*: His Honour placed the issue of late emergence in the context of the consultation process, which he thought insufficient. Earlier investigators into matters concerning the Hindmarsh Island bridge, including Justice Samuel Jacobs in 1993, as well as Justice Iris Stevens, had considered that the Chapmans had sought to consult with Aboriginal and other relevant interests beyond the requirements of law, but Judge von Doussa found otherwise. Perhaps decades rather than years are sufficient for applications to build bridges in South Australia. His experiences of native title cases had evidently made His Honour well acquainted with "the phenomenon of eleventh hour disclosure". However, late disclosure in native title cases has often been linked to the physical isolation of eleventh hour applicants, whereas North Terrace, Adelaide, where Doreen Kartinyeri was engaged in mapping genealogies, is not vastly distant from Hindmarsh Island, and was less so from news stands with billboards announcing this or that crisis relating to the island.

The absence of Doreen Kartinyeri from Hindmarsh Island controversies until April, 1994 is surely remarkable. According to Margaret Simons, Doreen Kartinyeri "first heard a bridge was proposed for Hindmarsh Island in late 1993 or early 1994". If this is true it undermines any claim that she had a deep interest in Hindmarsh Island, let alone that she feared that a bridge there would imperil Ngarrindjeri fertility. Working as she was in Adelaide in the South Australian Museum, it seems incredible that she had never heard that a bridge was proposed to Hindmarsh Island or, if she knew of it, that she should have suppressed for so long information she deemed in 1994 to be sufficient to ban its construction. Deane Fergie claimed in 1994 that Doreen Kartinyeri "was in hospital in Adelaide in early January of this year when she heard about the proposed construction for the first time". Simons wrote that Kartinyeri "hadn't been well that year, or for several years before".<sup>22</sup> But neither Fergie nor Simons claimed that Doreen Kartinyeri had been in hospital, presumably in an isolation ward, for the previous ten years as

well.

2. *Alleged lack of pre-1993 anthropological evidence.* What His Honour heard from Deane Fergie, Diane Bell, Neil Draper and Steve Hemming had convinced him that there had been such pre-1994 evidence for the “women’s business”. His Honour certainly would not have found support for “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island from the standard authorities. However, he may have been impressed by anthropological information provided by some Ngarrindjeri women who appeared before him. Stella Newchurch told him that on February 1, 2000 she saw a “very striking photograph of the Murray Mouth” in *The Advertiser*. It reminded her of stories told her in her girlhood by Doreen Kartinyeri’s Aunty Rosie.

Unfortunately, so Margaret Simons relates, “what Newchurch said is still subject to a suppression order”. However, Simons was able to reveal that Newchurch “said that Aunty Rosie had claimed that Aboriginal women went to Hindmarsh Island to abort babies that they had conceived with white men, and that the Murray Mouth area had an association with the female form”.<sup>23</sup> It seemed a pity that Mrs Newchurch had not remembered Aunty Rosie’s words back in 1994-5. Another Ngarrindjeri woman, Iris Sparkes, told Justice von Doussa that when she was a child, a boy had persuaded one of her female friends to swim out to Hindmarsh Island, because no males were allowed there. Some might object, of course, that when Iris Sparkes was a girl a large number of males lived on Hindmarsh Island.

3. *The evidence of the “dissident” women.* Justice von Doussa adjudged that “one reason that could render it culturally inappropriate to pass on the information [about the “secret women’s business”] would be that the member of the next generation was no longer interested in traditional practices and beliefs”. His Honour agreed with Doreen Kartinyeri that the dissident women had never been entrusted with the secrets of women’s business in Hindmarsh Island because:

“.....they consider traditional Ngarrindjeri culture and practices as historical curiosities that are no longer a part of, or appropriate to, their current lifestyle as Christian members of a wider urban community”.

If His Honour and Doreen Kartinyeri are correct in this, we all should pay tribute to the incredible foresight of Aunty Rosie, Nanna Laura and Grandmother Sally, Kartinyeri’s three supposed informants, in picking out which of their granddaughters and nieces were likely to be converted to Christianity. An even greater difficulty with Doreen Kartinyeri’s claim is that Aunty Rosie, Nanna Laura and Grandmother Sally, the three women she named as her informants, were all Christians.

Perhaps His Honour ought to have given more consideration to the highly restricted previous distribution of what Doreen Kartinyeri claimed in 1994 was “women’s business”? In some cases there was a sharp clash of testimony. Dorothy Wilson claimed that, at the crucial Hindmarsh Island meeting, the other women present said that the stories were new to them. Before Judge von Doussa, Maggie Jacobs, Veronica Brodie and Isobel Norvill stated that they had known about the “secret women’s business” before Doreen Kartinyeri told them about it. Maggie Jacobs added that she had told Dorothy Wilson that she knew of the stories.

Whoever was telling the truth or otherwise, one thing is certain: the overwhelming majority of a group of supposedly senior Ngarrindjeri women or Elders had not heard of Doreen Kartinyeri’s “women’s business” before. If the women’s business was known to three other women as well as Doreen Kartinyeri, why was it not known to more or less the whole mature female Ngarrindjeri population? And in what way was Doreen Kartinyeri a special bearer of restricted tradition, if Maggie Jacobs, who had no close personal contact with Sally Kartinyeri, Laura Kartinyeri or Rose Kropinyeri, knew what only three or four others knew?

Dorothy Wilson, who became one of the most prominent of the “dissident women”, testified before the Royal Commission that “Grandma Sally” Kartinyeri was one of three women Doreen



Kartinyeri claimed had transmitted secret women's business to her. According to Margaret Simons, Doreen Kartinyeri "denies that she mentioned Grandma Sally to Dorothy Wilson as one of her sources on 'women's business' ". Kartinyeri supposedly told Simons: "That is something I would never have discussed with Grandma Sally. She was a Christian". That is on page 155. However, on page 172 Simons gives us Doreen Kartinyeri's 1994 letter to Robert Tickner, which includes:

"I have always known about the stories associated with Raminyeri and Ngarrindjeri Women's Business but until recently I didn't know the exact place that they referred to. My grandmother Sally Kartinyeri, my Great Aunt Laura Kartinyeri and my Aunty Rose Kropinyeri passed these stories about Women's Business to me".

It was to this letter that Judge Iris Stevens referred when she commented that "if Doreen Kartinyeri did not know the exact place to which her stories related, she could not have known of the 'women's business'. By its nature, the place was an inextricable component of the 'women's business' ".<sup>24</sup>

4. *Nonsensical claims about the potentially destructive effects of the bridge.* Justice von Doussa was irritated by arguments that it is nonsensical to believe that a bridge was likely to create destruction, since barrages had existed for decades without harm to Ngarrindjeri women or anyone else. He stated that:

"..... spiritual beliefs do not lend themselves to proof in strictly formal terms. Their acceptance by true believers necessarily involves a leap of faith".

In 1994 no Ngarrindjeri women claimed that dire consequences to their health and fertility had resulted from building barrages on the Murray, although these had changed the landscape considerably and sometimes prevented any "meeting of the waters". The foundations of the Goolwa barrage alone required 4,770 timber piles of up to ten metres in length to be driven into the river bed. A central line of interlocked steel sheet piling, 10-12 metres in depth, acts as a cut off. The building of the ferry approaches required pylons to be driven into the riverbed, 30-40 metres from each side, to a depth of up to 18 metres. Many Aborigines helped build these barrages; John McHughes, the sole remaining Aboriginal resident in the Goolwa area by the 1990s, took a leading part in that work. He never heard of any objections or of "women's business" relating to Hindmarsh Island.

At first Doreen Kartinyeri and Deane Fergie praised the barrages, whilst condemning bridges. Doreen Kartinyeri even suggested that "in a sense, the barrages aid the proper functioning of the Lower Murray waters in modern conditions and drew an analogy with a 'pace-maker' ".<sup>25</sup> Some Aboriginal women told Dr Fergie that any bridge would "make the system sterile", because a bridge "goes above the water" and "is a shore to shore, direct and permanent link".<sup>26</sup> However, Hindmarsh Island and Mundoo Island were already joined together by a bridge. If the key point had been to ensure continued "meetings of the waters", bridges were surely preferable to barrages, which are built to restrict the free flow of tidal water in order to preserve fresh water up stream. Judge Stevens concluded that:

"There is no foundation for any distinction between the construction of a bridge, a second ferry or the Goolwa barrage in the context of the 'women's business' ".<sup>27</sup>

Since 1994 Doreen Kartinyeri and her supporters have turned against barrages as well as bridges. Doreen Kartinyeri told feminist anthropologist Diane Bell in 1996 that the construction of the barrages "stopped the flow of water with the tides", and thus "destroyed the rushes the people used for weaving".<sup>28</sup> Although, of course, she could not "go into the details because of the sacredness of it", Kartinyeri revealed to Bell that Aunty Rosie, no longer around to contradict her niece, had once told her that when the jetty was built at Raukkan:

"The women were in a lot of pain, young babies were dying and women were having miscarriages...There was crying. There was moaning. And the older women were rolling around just like they'd had a stake driven into their side".

Diane Bell looked up the diary of George Taplin and found a reference to the building of the jetty, but

none to the agonies of the women. Bell asked, “Could we expect him to have recorded it had he noticed?”. It would be, she suggested, like asking “for evidence of the hell to which sinners go in order to acknowledge that following the Ten Commandments is a central Christian doctrine”.

### **Changes in Doreen Kartinyeri’s accounts**

Doreen Kartinyeri was born in Raukkan in 1935, but at ten went away to school in Adelaide. Then she lived at Point Pearce and married there a non-Ngarrindjeri man with whom she had six children, before moving to the north of South Australia with a western desert man. She became interested and skilled in genealogies. However, before she realised what the future held for her, she admitted in a Rigney family history she wrote in 1983:

“I didn’t know much about the culture, customs and language but I do know the identities of the Point Pearce and Point McLeay people”.

She obtained a modest position in the Family History Unit of the South Australian Museum, but soon her powerful personality enabled her to exert influence over her nominal superiors.

On 9 May, 1994 Doreen Kartinyeri claimed that the Hindmarsh Island was sacred because, during the 19th Century, Ngarrindjeri women had gone there to abort foetuses if they thought the fathers might be white. The preferred method was to place rocks on their stomachs to procure miscarriages. In many cases what she alleged was infanticide, not abortion. She told the women that one baby was killed if there were twins, although twin boys were both allowed to survive. She asserted that “women’s business” began 40,000 years ago, although for much of that period there were no white men around to father mixed race children, and Hindmarsh island was not an island.

“Women’s business” about Hindmarsh Island, Doreen Kartinyeri proclaimed, had been passed down to women, from mother to daughter, throughout the generation. She did not claim to have received the secret knowledge from her own mother, but named two other women as her informants: her grandmother, Sally Kartinyeri, and her aunt, Rose Kropinyeri. Later, in a letter to Robert Tickner of 12 May, 1994, Doreen Kartinyeri made a poor move and claimed as a further source her aunt Laura Kartinyeri. “Nanna Laura” was the daughter of Pinkie Mack, a midwife of the interwar years looked upon with veneration by many Ngarrindjeri women. Although the other two supposed informants had died many years earlier, Laura Kartinyeri was still alive and could be questioned.

Margaret Simons pinpoints as a “crucial moment” the incident on 9 May when, according to Dorothy Wilson, a leading Aborigine, Victor Wilson pointed to an aerial photograph of the Murray Mouth, Doug Milera compared the map to a “woman’s privates”, and Doreen Kartinyeri responded with, “Yes, I can see it now. I can see it”. According to Tim Wooley, when interviewed by Margaret Simons, it was George Trevorrow who had pointed at the map and commented simply, “It’s obvious, isn’t it?”, but there seems no doubt that one man or another pointed at the map. According to Simons, Tim Wooley and George Trevorrow told her there was no reference to female anatomy at all. Indeed, on the Simons version, which I take to be approved by Doreen Kartinyeri, the “women’s business” now current includes little, if anything, about any similarity between women’s sexual organs and the Murray Mouth.

According to Simons, Doreen Kartinyeri “was certain nobody would have mentioned a woman’s privates in front of her: ‘I would have smacked them in the mouth if they’d said that to me’”. Confidence in Kartinyeri’s fastidiousness concerning language is, however, slightly reduced when we read later in Simons’ book that she described Colin James, a journalist who had bent over backwards to please the militant Aboriginal lobby, as a “fucking white cunt”, and advised him to “fuck off and never come back”.<sup>29</sup>

Dorothy Wilson certainly worked very arduously and cunningly if she invented the supposed comparison between the Murray Mouth and a woman’s sexual organs. In his interview with journalist Chris Kenny, Doug Milera claimed several times that the “women’s business” was based at least in part

on supposed similarity between a woman and/or her sexual organs and the Murray Mouth.<sup>30</sup> Chris Kenny was in no doubt that Milera “corroborated Dorothy Wilson’s version of events in the Mouth House”. A letter from Rick Marshall, a non-Aboriginal supporter of Aboriginal causes, to *The Advertiser* had alleged that his grandmother told him of an Aboriginal legend with the Murray Mouth as the vagina.

At the next meeting of the Ngarrindjeri women at Graham’s Castle, Doreen Kartinyeri herself displayed a small version of the aerial photograph of the Murray region, pointed to it, and described the parts of the body that the various bits of the landscape represented. In other words, she repeated the sort of performance that one of the Ngarrindjeri men had carried out earlier. Later on Kartinyeri repeated the process before Cheryl Saunders, who was told by one of the women, “Well, you know, work it out for yourself”.<sup>31</sup>

Doreen Kartinyeri’s references to similarities between the Murray Mouth and sexual organs became fewer and fewer after 1996, as did her references to Hindmarsh Island as a birthing or abortion site. This may have been because she and those close to her decided that such references were too secret to be made again. On the other hand, it may be because they realised that those claims, whether true or false, were deeply damaging to the reputation of the Ngarrindjeri.

In 1860 a Dr Wyatt testified to a Select Committee of the South Australian Legislative Council that infanticide, particularly female infanticide, sometimes took place among the Ngarrindjeri, most often if the mother was still suckling another child. The missionary George Taplin told the Select Committee that, although the men “do not like the idea of allowing their wives to prostitute themselves to white men”, many of the men and women “like to have white children...because they excite more compassion among white women and can obtain larger gifts of food and clothes”. To lessen family discord, the fiction was developed of claiming that the women with pale-faced babies had eaten too much white flour. There was no indication that Ngarrindjeri babies of mixed descent were more likely to be killed than were other babies, but if anything the reverse. By 1913, the next time a Royal Commission was appointed in South Australia to investigate Aboriginal issues, the decisive majority of the Ngarrindjeri people was of mixed descent. No evidence before 1994 links Ngarrindjeri infanticide or abortion with Hindmarsh Island.

The dissident Ngarrindjeri women indignantly rejected Doreen Kartinyeri’s claim that there was such a link. When told by Doreen Kartinyeri that white men took the Aboriginal women to Hindmarsh Island to destroy their half-caste babies, one Ngarrindjeri woman replied, “If that’s the case, why are we the colour we are today?”<sup>32</sup> Pinkie Mack, whom Doreen Kartinyeri claimed as the ultimate authentic source of the “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island, was the daughter of a white Australian, the Sub-Protector George Mason, and received her nickname from her colouring.

The sexual organs business did not disappear completely, and with the passing of time, Doreen Kartinyeri’s recall became ever more powerful. By 1996 she had remembered that in 1954, when her first child was born, she looked at a map on the back of a door. She realised in 1996, “I was looking at Mundoo and between Hindmarsh Island, and I could see the inside of a woman, like it represented the shape of the womb and the ovaries”.<sup>33</sup> Her insight was remarkable, since it was apparently a small-scale map “from Port Augusta down”.

By the time Margaret Simons interviewed her a few years later still, Doreen Kartinyeri had remembered even more detail. She was then able to recall that, after seeing the map, “I couldn’t wait to talk to Aunty Rosie about it. I delivered the milk to Aunty Rosie the next Saturday and I said, ‘How did you fellows know?’ ”<sup>34</sup> Apparently Doreen Kartinyeri, at least by the time Margaret Simons was writing her 2003 book, “had not read the Royal Commission transcript, nor the report. Sandra Saunders had kept it away from her. ‘It will make you too angry’ ”, she had said.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Sandra Saunders has become her keeper. If Doreen Kartinyeri ever decides to read the Royal Commission report and transcripts, it may jog her memory into renewed activity.

In her evidence to Judge Matthews, Doreen Kartinyeri concentrated on the relationship between

the sky and the waters of the Goolwa channel. Here, she claimed, “is the starting of life. It begins here, of the Ngarrindjeri nation”. She explained that the old people believed that if they were a boat on the Goolwa channel, they could not stay motionless, because:

“You’ve got to let the waters look up to the sky, and the sky look down to the waters, and on nice evenings when we were sitting out they’d talk about the Seven Sisters in the sky and our Ngarrindjeri up there, the bright stars in the Milky Way”.

Kartinyeri does not seem to have told Matthews that this was secret knowledge, so it is difficult to understand why she did not use it earlier, if known to her then.

### **Creative mythology**

In 1996 Maggie Jacobs told Diane Bell that the Ngarrindjeri had suffered because “the rising water” had covered the fish traps. In contrast, Eileen McHughes was concerned that the water level has fallen, which indeed it has since white settlement began, and is now too low.<sup>36</sup> Diane Bell did not seem to notice that Maggie Jacobs and Eileen McHughes had opposite complaints about the water level, or that no Aborigines had been on Hindmarsh Island to set fish traps for many years.<sup>37</sup>

Although both bridges and barrages are now deemed bad for Aboriginal health, literature can effect wondrous cures. Or at least books by Diane Bell can. According to Margaret Simons, Ellen Trevorror had been trying to become pregnant for years, but without success, until she read Bell’s book and was pregnant soon afterwards. Evidently, “the Ngarrindjeri community was full of such stories”, and Simons “heard of post-menopausal women who had read the book and had their first pregnancy for years”. Simons “heard of other surprise pregnancies and gynaecological problems resolved”.<sup>38</sup> Ellen Trevorror told Margaret Simons that she “didn’t know of secret women’s business when the fight against the bridge began, but she believed in it when her Elders told her” and when her *mivi* told her. Simons explains that “*mivi* is a Ngarrindjeri word that translates as something between soul and instinct”, and “is located in the stomach, has to do with the umbilical cord, and is passed from parent to child, but training can develop it”.<sup>39</sup>

There are no grounds for any fears that mythic inspiration is fading in Australia. How much ought to be termed fabrication is hard to determine, but one can only wonder at the extent of memory recovery of which many people seem capable. Before the emergence of Doreen Kartinyeri in April, 1994, Sarah Milera had been regarded as the leading Ngarrindjeri woman opponent of the Hindmarsh Island bridge. Sarah knew little about Hindmarsh Island in 1993, but began to remedy that deficiency by reading the Berndts’ *The World That Was*. On 15 April, 1994 Sarah told a group that included the new South Australian Liberal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Michael Armitage, “I have found where I come from”, but she gave no indication then of any specifically “women’s business” there, which it seems likely she would have done, had there been anything to relate.

Now Margaret Simons, attributing this information partly to Sarah Milera and partly to Rose Draper, then the wife of Neale Draper, has related that Sarah and Rose were once walking in Hindmarsh Island, where both were then employed in the archaeological survey organised by Neale Draper. Sarah had been in communication with her magpies, when suddenly “the hair stood up on the back of our necks”, and Rose realised that something was “grinding away inside” Sarah. Sarah told Rose that she could tell her husband that the Murray Mouth was a “women’s fertility site”. According to Margaret Simons, Sarah had given this information to Rose before Christmas, 1993, so that “women’s business” was not simply concocted in April, 1994.

When Margaret Simons contacted her, “at first Rose had no idea” when this highly significant exchange had taken place, but within a few days Rose conceded that it might have been in 1993. Margaret Simons asks her readers: “Why was Rose Draper not called to give evidence, and cross examined on the crucial question of dates?”. However, even Homer nods, and the handwritten letter

from Rose Draper that Margaret Simons found in the Royal Commission archive began: “During 1994 I had been employed as a crew member...”. In addition, Rose Draper is an Aborigine, from New South Wales, and almost every Aboriginal woman who had been urged to appear before the Royal Commission had refused, and by then Rose Draper, separated from her husband, was living far away. In fact the secretariat of the Royal Commission did contact her, and Margaret Simons concedes, “Perhaps when Rose was contacted she was, as she admits she might have been, less than coherent...”.<sup>40</sup> Simons did not tackle the problem of Sarah Milera’s failure in April, 1994 to divulge these revelations.

Sarah Milera told Diane Bell about the effect of contractors on Hindmarsh Island:

“It’s not just a feeling. The injury can put you in hospital. When they drove the pegs into the ground I felt a spiritual wounding...they rushed me to the hospital. They didn’t know what to do with me, because I was wounded with pegs going into the ground where children were born. I was really hurt”.<sup>41</sup>

Sarah also told Bell, “I was directed to Goolwa through my dreams”, not by militant Davey Thomason to the house of Ann Lucas, as was thought earlier.<sup>42</sup>

In like vein Eileen McHughes revealed to Diane Bell that when in 1994 at Hindmarsh Island a toilet was taken from a truck, “it sort of moved, made a dent in the earth...it was just like we’d been stabbed in the heart”. Sarah Milera’s cousin, Rocky Koolmatrerie, told the Royal Commission in 1996, “I just cannot understand how she knows or have anything to do with Hindmarsh Island. She comes from Meningie, the same as the rest of our family, and I know I was not told one thing about Hindmarsh Island until I seen it on TV”.<sup>43</sup>

Veronica Brodie has also enjoyed renewed powers of recall. In her evidence to the Royal Commission, where she was the only proponent of “women’s business” to appear, Veronica Brodie claimed that she told the other women she knew about “women’s business”. This claim conflicts with the accounts of not only Dorothy Wilson, but also Deane Fergie and Cheryl Saunders, who, if Veronica had spoken, would surely have named Veronica Brodie in their reports among the “custodians” and informants about “women’s business”. Veronica Brodie told the Commission she had not received her knowledge of women’s business from her mother, Rebecca Wilson, also known as Kumi, as Betty Fisher had stated earlier, and denied that her mother ever had “secret” knowledge of that type.<sup>44</sup> Veronica Brodie named her deceased sister Leila as her informant.

White radical activist Betty Fisher, who is also an astrologist of the school of Hypatia of Alexandria, is a major figure in Margaret Simons’ efforts to rehabilitate “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island. Fisher claimed to have a typewritten transcript of a conversation in the late 1960s with Rebecca Wilson. On 26 April, 1994 Betty Fisher met Shirley Peisley at the International Women’s Day Committee and arranged to be put in touch with Doreen Kartinyeri.

When they met, Betty Fisher for some strange reason denied that she had any information about Ngarrindjeri “women’s business”, but Doreen Kartinyeri told her, “Betty, I know all the stories, but these whities have to have written proof”. Fisher produced for the Royal Commission a partial transcript of two tapes that she said included conversations with Kumi. The transcript included:

“...our women went over to the island – that’s Hindmarsh Island – to undertake all our women’s things there...they went to acknowledge all those places over there...things we still regard as sacred...All around the Murray Mouth, all the waters, so important. Our people knew about those places, the tides, the Coorong secrets, the Islands, so special, sacred to us. We don’t talk about those things – too secret, too old, all part of the old times, what you call the dreamtime...”

Kumi covered the barrages as well: “I learnt when I was very young, when those old people cried over the barrages...”

Clearly, if authentic, this tape would prove that there was significant Hindmarsh Island “women’s business” well before 1994. However, Betty Fisher refused to provide it for the Royal Commission,

partly because “the information now belonged to Veronica Brodie”, her mother having died. Fisher overcame her scruples and on 23 June, 1995 a press conference was called by the ALRM to hear her revelations. The conference was called off at the last minute, but Fisher made arrangements instead to reveal her secrets through Alison Caldwell of the ABC *7.30 Report* and the program was broadcast on 7 August, 1995.

Extracts from Fisher’s old notebook that Veronica Brodie shared with the ABC viewers included:

“Down there at Hindmarsh Island, that place, our sacred place. We go there, fires there, very important to men, too. Women’s stories in that place all secret...Nothing must lie between the waters and sky”.

At this time Veronica Brodie identified herself as a Ngarrindjeri woman, but a few months later she claimed that “her tribe” is the Kaurna.<sup>45</sup> This arose during a “sacred-site” case concerning the former CSR factory in Glanville, which became a key part of a projected major development of Port Adelaide.

Two or three years later Veronica Brodie told Diane Bell that, as a result of women’s traditional ceremonies coming to an end, the whales had left the Ngarrindjeri shores, but would return if and when those ceremonies resumed.<sup>46</sup> Veronica Brodie’s grandfather, Dan “Killer” Wilson had, she said, many magical powers, so it is not surprising that Veronica has much of interest to reveal. Old Dan could sing people to death, or just whack them down with his waddy.

Culturally sensitive Alison Caldwell did not ask Betty Fisher why, if the information was so secret, Rebecca Wilson had decided to reveal it to her. At the Royal Commission, which rightly recognised the potential importance of Fisher’s claims, and changed its timetable to accommodate her the very next day, culturally insensitive Michael Abbott, QC was not so considerate. As Margaret Simons acknowledges, Fisher “made an appalling witness”. The most important parts of her supposed transcript, the passages I have quoted, were not on the tape, because, absolutely rotten luck, the tape she had been using had run out. Although the information was so vital, she had not thought it worthwhile to return with a fresh tape.

Fisher stated that she had promised Rebecca Wilson never to reveal what she had told her. This made it even odder that Fisher herself should have been informed in the first place, or that she should then have released the information over the ABC. Later in her evidence, Fisher claimed she had typed the most secret information on a separate piece of paper that was lodged in a bank security box. Then, surprise, surprise, Fisher stated she was not prepared to make this piece of paper available. Michael Abbott recommended that Fisher be charged with perjury, but her son died and she was excused any further appearance before the Commission.

Although she had made poor use of her day in court, Betty Fisher battled on. She posted the precious scrap of paper, folded in a cardboard cover, to Veronica Brodie. According to Simons, the story inside concerned “seven sisters who were very beautiful”, and variations of Seven Sisters myths from around the world. However, Simons does not include any references to Hindmarsh Island or the Murray Mouth in her rendering of this scrap of paper.

Fresh recollections of traditional beliefs flourish among the affirmative Ngarrindjeri. Eileen McHughes remembers learning from her grandfather, Michael Gollan, that dead bodies were “smoked” on Mundoo Island. When his family were going home from Raukkan, they would hear a baby crying, until one day they found the baby on the ground and put it up in a tree. They never heard those sounds again.<sup>47</sup> Maggie Jacobs related that in 1967, when David Unaipon died in hospital, the bird he used to talk with began to sing and flap his wings to tell his niece, some miles away, that he had died and in Taillem Bend, because the bird looked straight in that direction.<sup>48</sup> Sheila Goldsmith had a bird that told her when a letter was coming from her fiancé.

### **The anthropologists fight back**

The Royal Commission was a significant setback for radical anthropology in Australia, but its leading

practitioners were as determined as Doreen Kartinyeri to fight back. This required an assault on the Berndts and others early regarded as authoritative. Dr Rod Lucas led the attack on delinquent women anthropologists. He asserted that Alison Brookman, an anthropologist who testified before the Royal Commission, was only “young and inexperienced” when she spent time with the renowned song-woman, midwife and Berndt informant, Margaret ‘Pinkie’ Mack, and “had not established a relationship of trust with Pinkie Mack”. Dr Lucas “would not be surprised if culturally sensitive information had not been imparted to her”.<sup>49</sup> He doubted whether Dorothy Tindale “was in a position of trust to have had restricted or esoteric knowledge revealed to her”. He claimed that “at the time of her fieldwork amongst the Ngarrindjeri, Catherine Berndt was young, childless and inexperienced”. Dr Lucas doubted, too, “that Fay Gale knew as much as she thought she did”, precisely because she had not “mingled or lived amongst” Aboriginal people.<sup>50</sup>

Dr Lucas was appalled that the Royal Commission used “various empirical ‘facts’ ” in order “to discredit Ngarrindjeri belief”. These empirical “facts” included changes in the sea level and the course of the Murray, which among other things ensured that there was for a very long time no Hindmarsh Island at all, of any shape. Dr Lucas noted correctly that “the use of an obscure and remote geological history to refute Aboriginal heritage claims is not new”.<sup>51</sup> And many other heritage claims as well. Indeed, the intellectual climate of the 19th Century was transformed by empirical “facts” that made it very unlikely that the world had been created in 4004 BC, or that the whole world had been inundated by Noah’s flood.

Dr Lucas is a typical cultural relativist. He believes that “the assertion of a documentary reality is itself an ideological and rhetorical act” that requires entry into “a relationship of knowing in which it does not matter who we are, where we stand...”.<sup>52</sup> Given his contempt for the concept of documentary reality, it seems strange that Dr Lucas was so anxious to discredit anthropologists who “stand” differently from him and his wife, Dr Deane Fergie.

Dr Fergie launched vituperative attacks on the Royal Commission. She agreed that there had been “a fabricated account of the ‘women’s business’ ”, but alleged that the fabrication had been “*in and by the commission itself*” (emphasis as in original).<sup>53</sup> She was very angry about the use in the Royal Commission report of the phrase “secret sacred women’s business”, whereas, she claimed, the phrases she used were “women’s secret knowledge” and “oral tradition”. Her implication seems to have been that Doreen Kartinyeri never thought that anything sacred was involved in her claims.<sup>54</sup>

By 1996, Dr Fergie argued that earlier she had only suggested that the “restricted knowledge related to a specialist domain in Ngarrindjeri culture – the domain of the female *putari* or midwife”. This move partly solved one problem for Deane Fergie and Doreen Kartinyeri: why was it that so few Ngarrindjeri women knew anything about “women’s business”, knowledge or oral tradition, secret or open, sacred or profane, relating to Hindmarsh Island, especially if, as Doreen Kartinyeri claimed at first, this information had been routinely passed on from mother to daughter? A problem with the new account was that Doreen Kartinyeri and Deane Fergie were not midwives. Deane Fergie might have been wiser had she placed all her writings into sealed envelopes.

Neale Draper and Peter Sutton rallied to the cause. Dr Draper found in the diary of early 20th Century white Goolwa resident Charles Harding that a “native” had told him that the name “Goolwa” might not mean “elbow”, as generally held to be the case, but referred instead to fresh water or waters meeting. The idea was taken up by another male anthropologist, Peter Sutton, despite his fear that it was “just speculation” that Goolwa might have this alternative meaning.<sup>55</sup>

Peter Sutton also found that in 1969 Annie Rankine had recorded a Seven Sisters story: her father had told her not to swim when the Seven Sisters were moving and the dandelions were in bloom. When the flowers died and the constellation moved further, they were allowed in to the water.<sup>56</sup> Dandelions are, of course, an introduced species, but that only shows the vigour and adaptability of Ngarrindjeri myth.

The same could be said of the 19th Century version in which the Seven Sisters change sex and also enjoy a good smoke. Sutton elaborated his Seven Sisters ideas, and seems to have become a true believer himself:

“...the building of a bridge would undoubtedly constitute desecration. The injury caused by a bridge would be, in part at least, that the dead and the unborn, who move up and down respectively between the same two places, would no longer have free passage to their destination, as that specific point in the landscape, and thus in Ngarrindjeri belief conception would be hindered”.

Informed amateurs can also help. When the Mileras were brought up from Murray Bridge to provide the first Aboriginal input into the anti-bridge campaign, it was Ann Lucas who arranged their accommodation. A few years later Ann Lucas told Margaret Simons that she had discovered about the Goolwa channel, at “exactly where the bridge was to be built”, that “the sun shone on the equinox, and perhaps here too the waters used to meet at equinox”. Indeed, the “mouth of the longest river in the most ancient land” might be a giant astrological clock.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusion

“Aboriginal Studies” in our universities are controlled by a peculiar ideology that combines postmodernism and primitive superstition. In a special 1996 number of the *Journal of Australian Studies*, published by the University of Queensland, on *Secret Women’s Business: Hindmarsh Island Affair*, the seven contributors were Deane Fergie, Rod Lucas, Steve Hemming, Betty Fisher, Lyndall Ryan, whose work on Tasmanian history Keith Windschuttle has recently demolished, Christine Nicholls and Kathie Muir. Although they are great advocates of “Aboriginal autonomy”, the editors of the *Journal of Australian Studies* evidently could not produce a single Aboriginal contributor. Dulcie Wilson or Dorothy Wilson would have obliged if asked, but such politically incorrect Aboriginal women are beyond the pale of our current university establishments.

Australia is likely to witness many more follies similar to that of the “women’s business” at Hindmarsh Island. In the end, however, the spirit of the dissident women of the Ngarrindjeri will triumph. *Magna veritas et praevalabit.*<sup>58</sup>

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[Editor’s note].