



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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**LAKE MUNGO

*Barry Wright

Lake Mungo, in New South Wales, is the home of the first known people in this country. Here, the oldest known evidence of Aboriginal people in Australia has been found. Because of its importance, it is a site which everyone should know about. To give us a feeling for Lake Mungo, Billy Reid, the illustrator of *The Aboriginal Health Worker* and *The Aboriginal Child at School*, came with me on a trip. We travelled west to the Darling River (whose Aboriginal name is Calewatta), and then south-east to Lake Mungo itself. Billy made wonderful drawings to represent the deeds and everyday life of those people. This can be reconstructed from the fossil evidence found at Lake Mungo. He has also drawn some scenes of life along the banks of the Calewatta - the river which is Billy's own home. He hails from Bourke.

Mungo National Park is 110 kilometres north-east of Mildura on the Arumpo-Ivanhoe Road. The area was made a National Park in March 1979. It is a very isolated place.

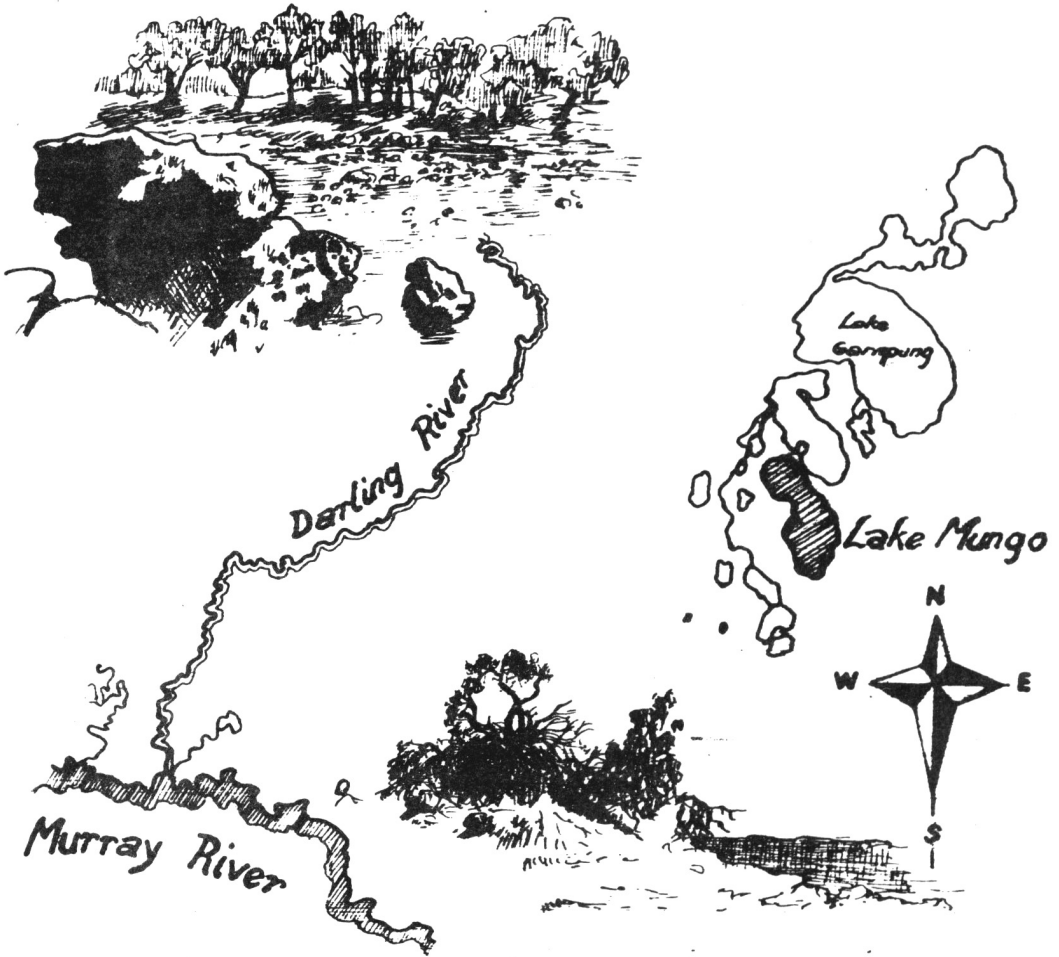
Since it became a National Park sheep have not been allowed to graze here and the native plants and animals are returning. There is saltbush on the old dry lake bed, beulah (a leafless casuarina) on the sandplains bordering the lake, and mallee on the dunes.

As the native plants have come back so have the original birds and animals. There are emu, orange and white fronted chats and pink cockatoos, as well as the ever-present happy jacks. There are red and western kangaroos, echidnas, native mice and bats. Snakes and lizards which live in the park include shingle backs, bearded dragons, geckos, the western brown, common brown and whip snakes.

The real interest of Mungo, or Gol Gol, for Aboriginal people is the heritage that it holds. These old dry lake beds were once filled, and their shores were the scene of life for many extinct animals. Aboriginal people lived by this plentiful lakeside. From the dunes about Lake Mungo, archaeologists have discovered animal remains. These have been well preserved over long periods of time. From these, the ecology of the area, and the general lifestyle of its Aboriginal inhabitants can be learned.

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It appears that Aboriginal people lived about the shores of Lake Mungo 40,000 years ago. These people used stone tools and their diet included golden perch, Macquarie perch, Murray cod, shellfish, emu eggs, wallabies and rat kangaroos. It is reasonable to assume they also hunted and ate the now extinct giant diprotodons (wombat-like animals as big as a cow), giant kangaroos and emus.

At Lake Mungo we find the earliest evidence of burial of man with care and concern. Here are the remains of Aboriginal people whose bones had been broken, painted with red ochre, cremated and buried. The oldest of these burial sites dates back to 32,000 years before the present time.

From Mungo we are able to see the way Aboriginal people lived so many thousands of years ago. Many stone artifacts have been discovered at Lake Mungo. Grinding stones 15,000 years old show how Aboriginal people started to grind seeds so they could survive in the plains as the lakes dried up.

Remains of the giant short-faced kangaroo (scientific name *Procoptodon golan*) and many bones of hairy-nosed wombats and bettongs (small wallabies) are there, with remains of Tasmanian tigers and Tasmanian devils.

Mungo is not only important for all Australians, but for all people on our planet. It is a window into a distant past, showing how early Aborigines lived, and how they buried their dead with love and care when death came.

It is from the Darling River and eastwards to the area of Mungo that the present Barkangee peoples came. Perhaps it was the people of Mungo who were their long dead ancestors?

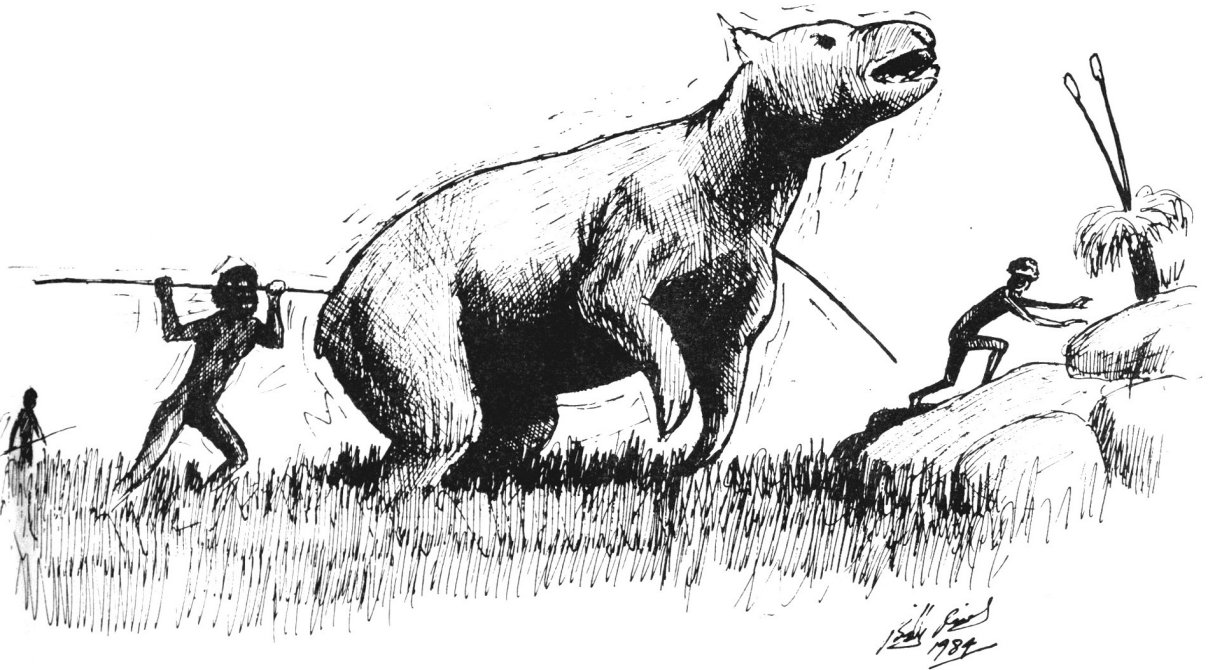


Mungo the Clever Man

The artist shows an elder of his people and arbiter of their fate. Embroiled in the stresses of a society practising cross-generational polygyny, he ponders the future. Most mature Aboriginal men wore a full uncut beard. Only since the coming of the Macassans over the last few centuries have we evidence of beards being cut, and only by those groups who were in contact with the trepang fishermen from Macassar.



The Australian marsupial lion, *Thylacoles*, was a tree-dwelling flesh eater. It possessed the largest cutting and shearing dentition of any known mammal. Fossil remains have been identified in association with diprotodon remains and Aboriginal camp sites at Keilor and Bacchus Marsh in Victoria, dating back to 30,000 B.P. Other remains in western NSW date to 26,000 B.P. This large carnivore was definitely a contemporary of Aboriginal man.



The diprotodon, now extinct, was related to the kangaroo and in size resembled a rhinoceros. Archaeological evidence linking Aboriginal people with the extinct fauna of Australia has lately been found in several places. At Lake Mungo, the fossil bones of twelve extinct giant marsupials have been found in place with stone tools. At Keilor, north of Melbourne, diprotodon bones have been found associated with camp remains and charcoal. The legends of many tribes describe these animals. It is fair to conclude that they were hunted by Aboriginal man, as pictured here by the artist.