

# Adnyamathanha Night Skies

BY PAUL CURNOW B.ED.

Aboriginal Australians have been viewing the night skies of Australia for some 45,000 years and possibly much longer. During this time they have been able to develop a complex knowledge of the night sky, the terrestrial environment in addition to seasonal changes. However, few of us in contemporary society have an in-depth knowledge of the nightly waltz of stars above.

Much of the vast wealth of stellar knowledge accumulated by Indigenous Australians over tens of thousands of years, has now sadly been lost to antiquity. Nevertheless, because of the thoughtfulness of a small number of individuals and the ongoing oral tradition of many Aboriginal Australians some of this knowledge has been preserved.

Flinders Ranges, South Australia.



Before we venture into the stellar realm of one such group, it must be noted that before the European occupation of Australia began in 1788, there were some 270+ distinct Aboriginal languages in Australia. Furthermore, allowing for dialectal diversity that number can be expanded to around 600 language areas. Accordingly, along with language diversity between groups other aspects of cultural diversity such as astronomy can vary widely.

The *Adnyamathanha* Peoples (sometimes spelt *Anyamatana*) come from the Flinders Ranges region of South Australia. The Flinders Ranges is located approximately 480 kilometres north of the city of Adelaide. These ranges extend for some 420km in length and are named after the British explorer Matthew Flinders, who sighted them during his mapping of the Australian coastline in 1802.

The Flinders Ranges is a timeless place of solitude as well as being the site of the incredible *Ediacaran* Fossil finds and thus a geological wonderland. When the great civilizations of Babylon, Ancient Egypt and classical Rome were flourishing the Aboriginal Peoples of the Flinders had already lived in, hunted and roamed the area for thousands of years. Over time the various groups who now make up the *Adnyamathanha* Peoples have developed a close relationship with the natural world through their 'Dreaming'.

The name *Adnyamathanha* means 'rock people' or 'hill people', and contemporary *Adnyamathanha* are made up of a confederacy of the *Kuyani*, *Ngudlawara*, *Walypi*, *Yadlhiauda* and *Barngarla* Peoples (sometimes spelt *Pangkala*). Much of what we know about their view of the celestial ballet of stars above has been passed down through *Adnyamathanha* Elders and through the extensive work of Charles Percy Mountford (1890 -1976).

Charles Percy Mountford was born in Hallett, South Australia and was an anthropologist who first joined the Anthropological Society of South Australia in 1926, shortly after the passing of his beloved wife in 1925. He worked with many Aboriginal Cultures in remote areas of Australia during his extensive career. Furthermore, many agree that Charles Mountford collated an unmatched ethnographic record of the *Adnyamathanha* Peoples, which included many of their beliefs relating to the nightly movement of stars above.

In the magnificent sky world of the *Adnyamathanha* there are many ancestral beings. For example, as recorded by Mountford (1939) the *Adnyamathanha* believe that there are two women in the sky called the *Maudlangami*, (*ngami* means 'mother') whose breasts the spirit children originate from to later become the future children of the group.



Charles Percy Mountford

## ABORIGINAL ASTRONOMY

Interestingly, this is not the only celestial mammary narrative because the Ancient Greeks have an account of how the Milky Way came into existence that involves the same pieces of female anatomy. They believed that the goddess *Hera* had squirted breast milk across the heavens to create the Milky Way and to this day we still refer to our galaxy as the 'Milky Way Galaxy'.

The *Adnyamathanha* also believe that there are two men in the sky known as the *Wundukara*, who have long beards that they can release down to the ground. Only a small group of 'wise men' in the *Adnyamathanha* are believed to be able to communicate with and see the *Wundukara*. Unfortunately, it was never recorded whether the *Wundukara* correspond with a visible celestial object or objects.

Our magnificent southern night skies also feature two misty white patches known as the Magellanic Clouds. The Magellanic Clouds are two satellite galaxies orbiting our own and the light from these two irregular shaped galaxies can be seen naked eye under dark skies. These misty white patches first came to the attention of Europeans when the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan recorded them during his journey south in 1519. The Large Magellanic Cloud, which contains around 10,000 million stars, lies approximately 170,000 light years away and the Small Magellanic Cloud lies approximately 230,000 light years away.

As recorded by Tunbridge (1988), the *Adnyamathanha* call the Magellanic Clouds *Vutha Varkla* and they are seen as two male lawmen also known as the *Vaalnapa*. In Aboriginal society strict marriage laws are observed and most groups within Australia are divided into two 'moieties'. For example, *Adnyamathanha* society is divided into the *Mathari* and *Arraru* moieties. This means that if you are a *Mathari* person that you are not permitted to marry another *Mathari* person. Also, if you are an *Arraru* person you cannot marry another *Arraru* individual. Therefore, in *Adnyamathanha* society you must marry someone of the opposite moiety.

Consequently, the *Adnyamathanha* speak about the two *Vaalnapa*, or 'two lawmen'. These 'two mates', the *Vaalnapa*, had created a fire and are believed to have travelled up into the heavens on the sparks coming from this fire in order to watch over the people and now appear as the two Magellanic Clouds. Furthermore, where some of the sparks from their fire came down to the ground this was an explanation of how gold deposits were formed and where the ashes came to rest on the ground this is believed to have formed lead.

In addition to appearing as the two clouds of Magellan, the lawmen appear as various topographical features in the Flinders Ranges and are also believed to be responsible for the creation of some of these magnificent geographical features. Thus, even to this day, the 'two lawmen' still gaze over the *Adnyamathana* Nation as they have done for aeons assuring that marriage laws are still adhered to.

Interestingly, when missionaries first ventured to the lands of the *Adnyamathanha* in the hope of converting them to the Christian faith in the 1800's they told the *Adnyamathanha* that if they were bad that 'god' resided in the sky and that they could be punished. To which the *Adnyamathanha* would reply, "Yes we know there are two of them," referring to the two lawmen watching over them.

Additionally, like many early cultures across our vast planet the open star cluster the Pleiades is seen as a group of maidens. As recorded by Mountford (1939), the Pleiades are known to the *Adnyamathanha* Peoples as the *Makara*, and are seen a group of marsupial-like women with pouches. These marsupial women are viewed as a group of 'ice maidens' for as the Pleiades make their first appearance before the sun (heliacal rising) and slowly journey across the sky, it is believed that their pouches are filled with ice crystals. **Page 14 ▶**

*Stellar Lawmen with Paul Curnow; Arkaroola.*



*The Oliphant Observatory, Arkaroola; Paul with Joe Grida.*



These ice crystals fall from the pouches of the *Makara* and also stream from their eyes and ears as they travel and the result is the morning frost being spread across the ground. When this takes place the younger members of the group rub these ice crystals on their bodies. It is believed that this will enable the males to grow long beards and become strong, and that the young females will become healthy and fertile. This also coincides with the *Wundukara* releasing their long beards down from the sky to the surface of the Earth.

The *Adnyamathanha* also believe that the region is home to the giant serpent *Akurra*. It is believed that the serpent (or sometimes serpents) formed many of the topographical features of the ranges. For example, it is believed that the *Akurra* drank all the water from Lake Frome. In fact, the *Akurra* drank so much water from Lake Frome that his stomach became very swollen and as he crawled up through the creeks he formed all the gullies with his swollen body.

As recorded by Tunbridge (1988), there is another story that relates to the Pleiades. The Pleiades were also known as *Artunyi* a group of maidens. One of the giant serpents had swallowed up the *Artunyi*, however, shortly after there came a great flood and the *Akurra* died. The floodwaters grew higher and higher and slowly reached up to the sky above. The body of the serpent was floating on top of the water and had become swollen as the body decayed. Eventually, the water became so high it nearly touched the sky and the decaying body of the *Akurra* burst open flinging the *Artunyi* into the sky where they remain to this day.

To conclude, the boastful hunter in the sky Orion was known as the *Miaridtja* to the *Adnyamathanha*. The *Miaridtja* is a group of men returning to camp after a day's hunting. The Pleiades set before the stars of Orion and it is believed that the *Makara* travel below the horizon before the *Miaridtja* to prepare a fire in order to cook the food that the men will bring back to camp. It is worth noting that the Kurna who come from the Adelaide Plains of South Australia and the Boorong of north western Victoria also see the stars of Orion as a group of men.

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## Weird Astronomy & Weirder Astronomers N. 13

By Les Laub

### Astronomical Predictions

In 1975, a housepainter and clairvoyant called John Nash prophesized that there was to be an earthquake which would cause a tidal wave to engulf Adelaide on 19 January 1976. He claimed it was God's punishment for Adelaide becoming a 'sin city'. Hysteria hit as a result and some people even sold their houses and moved away. There was unusually heavy traffic on roads leading to the Adelaide Hills, and the price of boats doubled temporarily.

On the morning of the 19th, Premier Don Dunstan went down to the shore at Glenelg, and enjoyed a very pleasant morning tea. He was followed by thousands, to prove that there was nothing to the prediction. Major General Stretton, the head of Australia's Natural Disaster Centre joked that he was bringing along a surfboard. Of course, the tidal wave never came.

Civilization has a long history of predictions of imminent, world-encompassing disaster but it seems that they turned up during the middle ages with almost clockwork regularity. Even Christopher Columbus seems to have been driven by a belief that he needed to help bring about the conversion of all of humanity before the end of the world. Nevertheless, such predictions often lent themselves to fraud and manipulation. One very good example is the Toledo Letter.

In 1184 a document called the Toledo Letter appeared and rapidly spread throughout Europe. It predicted that an ominous conjunction of the planets signaled the imminent end of the world in September 1186. When the letter reached the Archbishop of Canterbury in England it prompted him to order a 3-day fast. September 1186 came and went, and the world didn't end. But this didn't deter the letter's true believers. They kept circulating the letter for several more centuries, after changing the doomsday date and a few other minor details.

In the early fifteenth century the Taborites of Bohemia predicted that Christ would return to earth in February 1420 following an alignment of the planets. Once again, believers in the prophecy waited as the highly anticipated month came and went and nothing happened. But the anticlimax didn't deter the Taborites. They announced that Christ actually had returned, though he had decided to remain hidden. Bolstered by this conviction, they launched into thirty-two years of civil war against those who denied their claims!

Then, in 1499, the astrologer Johann Stöffler predicted that catastrophe in the form of meteorites would rain down on Europe in February 1524. As 1524 approached, mass hysteria engulfed Europe. Anticipating that the catastrophe would cause a tidal wave and flood, many people built boats or moved to higher ground. But by this time, a few people were growing more cynical of such predictions. The philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli responded to the warning by sardonically urging the women of Florence to run away to the hills and live with the hermits. Once again the catastrophe did not arrive. But for a while, it was fun to be a hermit.

**Sources:** The Adelaide Advertiser; Medieval Hoaxes (Internet)