

CHAPTER 10

Why Mulligan is not just another Irish name

Lake Callabonna, South Australia

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Introduction¹

When one looks at the current maps of the area to the north of Lake Frome (named after the explorer Edward Charles Frome), one can notice a couple of features known as Mulligan Hill and Mulligan Springs. These features are in the vicinity of Lake Callabonna, which originally bore the name Lake Mulligan. This was noted to be a corruption of the Aboriginal word *mullachan* (Manning 1986: 143). Lake Callabonna is known for its fossil reserve containing the remains of the extinct giant marsupial Diprotodon. Scientists were evidently led to the fossil area by Aboriginal informants, and excavations were undertaken by the South Australian Museum during 1893 (Pledge 1994: 66).

Discussion

Investigation into the Aboriginal name of Lake Callabonna was made by the author with Pearl McKenzie during the early 1990s. Mrs McKenzie said that Lake Callabonna was known in Adnyamathanha as *Malakanha* meaning 'a type of string bag'. The word was usually shortened by dropping the final vowel, so the name was said as *Malakanh*. When talking to Mrs McKenzie there was some confusion as to whether the names on the map came from an Irish surname Mulligan or from an Aboriginal source.

Geoffrey Manning, in his book *The Romance of Place Names of South Australia*, writes about Lake Callabonna:

Originally thought to be part of the 'horseshoe' configuration of Lake Torrens disproved by A. C. Gregory, in 1858. It was first known as Mulligan, a corruption of the Aboriginal word *mullachan*, the meaning of which was not recorded. (Manning 1986: 34)

Manning also mentions that the Aboriginal name 'Callabonna': "was suggested by Dr. Stirling, in 1894, who failed to record its meaning, but a pastoral station on the eastern shore carried the name" (Manning 1986: 34).

Dr Edward Stirling was the South Australian Museum director responsible for organising the Lake Callabonna excavations of 1893. Stirling's published report (Stirling 1900: v) records that Callabonna Station homestead was situated on Callabonna Creek which runs into the Lake. It is ironical that this proximity led Stirling to successfully push for the renaming of Lake Mulligan as Lake Callabonna, in the mistaken belief that Mulligan was not a 'native name' (Jones pers. comm.). Stirling's report includes a footnote to this effect, worth quoting in full:

It may be well to state, perhaps, that the so-called Lake in which the fossils were found has been hitherto usually spoken of as Lake Mulligan. That name, however, has never been officially conferred or recognised, and, indeed, it will not be found on any of the maps of South Australia. There prevails a very proper sentiment, unfortunately not always carried into action, that the native names of localities should as far as possible be retained. In this particular instance the euphonious native name Callabonna, which applies to a large watercourse leading into the Lake and to an adjoining sheep run, seemed appropriate in all respects, save that the association of sound and idea might erroneously suggest the possession of scenic beauties by an area which is not only waterless, but also almost unsurpassable for barrenness and utter desolation. The name suggested by the writer, however, has been approved by the South Australian Executive, and in future the locality is to be known officially as Lake Callabonna. (Stirling 1900: i)

The word 'Callabonna' is derived from Yadiyawarra language *kardla* 'fire' and *pirna* 'big' (Hercus pers. comm.). As happens frequently in languages of this area, the pre-stopping of nasal and lateral consonants is generally omitted in compound nouns. So *Kardla-pirna* becomes *Karla-pirna*, i.e. 'Callabonna'. A paddock name appearing on an early pastoral map of the area is spelt as 'Cadlabeena'. Gil Coulthard (pers. comm.) has heard the placename *Kardla-pirna* or *Ardla-pirna* from old-time cattle drovers working in the vicinity of Yandama and Boolkaree Creeks, but could not say exactly where the locality was.

Mulligan Springs, near Lake Callabonna, was discovered by Robert Stuckey in 1860. He mentioned that the Aborigines called it 'Mulligan' (Manning 1986: 143). It is interesting to note that Mulligan Spring was known to speakers of the Pirlatapa language as *Kurnuwanta*, possibly derived from *kurnu* 'one' or 'other' and *wanta* 'passing by' (Hercus pers. comm.), and among older generations of Adnyamathanha speakers as *Urnuwanda* (Gil Coulthard pers. comm.). The two versions of the name of the spring are really the same word, because in the Adnyamathanha language initial *k* is always lost.

The word *Malaka-nha* is composed of *malaka* meaning 'string bag' plus the location suffix *-nha*. This is a woven string bag with long shoulder straps. There seems to be some uncertainty as to whether the straps were located on one side of a person's neck and the bag allowed to drop onto the opposite side of the body. The bag usually hung at the person's side about the region of the upper thigh to the hip.

While the Aboriginal story of Lake Eyre representing a stretched-out kangaroo hide has been reasonably well known for a long time (Siebert 1910), considerably less is known about the representations of other lakes in the region. Pearl McKenzie's late husband, John, told the author about the dangers of any of the large playas of inland South Australia. He thought of them as traps because of the risk of breaking through the thin salt crust in some areas and becoming bogged in the black, oozy mud beneath the surface. Indeed, the Adnyamathanha name for Lake Frome is *Munda* meaning 'trap' – in two ways. On the one hand, the possibility of being caught in the mud, and secondly, if one studies the shape of the lake from directly above (via satellite imagery) it bears the shape of the trap-net known as *munda*, along with its draw-string, represented by the narrow channel at the northern extremity of the lake, to close the mouth of the trap.

Turning the attention back to Lake Callabonna, and looking from directly above, it is possible that this lake represents the string bag known as *malaka*. The lake proper is the woven bag, and the narrow channels stretching southwards towards Lake Frome represent the carrying straps or *yabma*. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to draw on the first-hand knowledge of the elders of some of the Aboriginal groups of this area to verify this information. However, material recorded by Schebeck from Andy Coulthard, tells of the wanderings of the ancestor *Virdni Murunha*: "there at Mulligan he was sitting while making his way towards the Flinders Ranges. He sat and manufactured a net bag. Then he travelled over the hill to *Mudlupanha*" (B. Schebeck pers. comm.).

John McKenzie also told of the wanderings of *Virdni Murunha* around the eastern shore of Lake Frome.

Interesting information on the old placename *Malakanha* comes from far afield. Study of the culture from western New South Wales by Jeremy Beckett has shed more light on some placenames in South Australia. A version of the story of the 'Two *Ngatyi*' or mythical snakes traveling from the Paroo near Wanaaring in New South Wales towards the Flinders Ranges was related to Jeremy Beckett by Alf Barlow, a Malyangapa man in 1958. Alf Barlow said: "Then went again they come to a salt-lake, *Maliga* Lake. They went into the neck of the Salt Creek, *Mangunguru*. Here some other *ngatyi*s stopped them and drove them back" (Beckett MS).

'Salt Creek' is the name given on modern maps for the biggest of the main channels, 'the strap' stretching southwards from Lake Callabonna towards Lake Frome, and the 'neck' is presumably a curved narrow section of this channel. It appears that *Mangunguru* was either the name for the Salt Creek or for this particular locality.

Furthermore, a map of inland Australia drawn by Justus Perthes Gotha in 1862 (in *Petermann's Geographische Mittheilungen*) shows Lake Callabonna (or perhaps Mulligan Springs) with the name as 'Malakana'. A later map by Gotha of 1867 again gives the name 'Malakana'.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that 'Mulligan' is a corruption of an Aboriginal word. It was most reassuring to learn this from the early maps of the area drawn up by Justus Perthes Gotha in 1862 and 1867 using the name 'Malakana'.

The completely independent information from Jeremy Beckett's manuscript shows how the stories of the travels of Ancestors linked Aboriginal groups together, and led to people having knowledge of distant places and placenames.

References

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Endnotes

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