Indigenous toponymy ~ Part 2

In our previous issue (September 2018) we looked at the nature of the Aboriginal toponymic system, particularly the ways in which Indigenous placenaming practices differ from European ones. In this instalment of the series, we'll briefly look at how words and placenames from Aboriginal languages have been incorporated into the toponymy of Australian English. We encounter such names on maps, on road-side signs and in our postal addresses: they are well established in what we refer to as the 'Introduced' system.

Approximately 28% of placenames in the 2012 *Gazetteer of Australia* have an Indigenous-derived element (i.e. a specific, a generic or both) (see Tent 2017).[1] The percentage of such names within each state or territory is remarkably homogenous—South Australia, Western Australia, and New South Wales each have around 30% such toponyms, and Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory 27%. Tasmania is the odd one out with a mere 4%. This probably reflects its shameful history of European occupation and displacement of its Indigenous people during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the current Indigenous-origin placenames in Tasmania are not in fact local but were introduced from the mainland.

The incorporation of placenames derived from Aboriginal languages into the Introduced system has been done to varying degrees of accuracy. Prior to European occupation, Australia had an estimated 200 to 300 distinct Aboriginal languages (Dixon 1980; Yallop 1982). Many indigenous names had erroneous recordings of their pronunciations, with a resulting anomalous rendering into the Roman alphabet. Various factors led to this:

(a) The Europeans who recorded these names had no knowledge of or training in phonetics, and therefore did not know how to properly transcribe those names.

(b) Aboriginal languages have sound systems quite distinct from English or any other European language. Most Aboriginal languages lack the fricative consonant sounds /f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, h/,[2] and generally make no distinction between /b/~/p/, /d/~/t/, and /g/~/k/ (distinctions crucial in English). Many Aboriginal languages have sounds not present in English, such as two or three r-type sounds that are considered distinct sounds, or a palatal nasal (as in the Spanish *ñ* in *señor*),

while other languages have a palatal plosive consonant (similar to the English sound represented in spelling by *ch*) (Yallop 1982). Such differences make it hard for the untrained ear to transcribe with any accuracy.

(c) Even when these differences were correctly perceived, transcribers found it difficult to render the sounds consistently in English orthography,[3] which contains only 26 symbols. So we see a single sound represented in English spelling in multiple ways, e.g. *ñ* may be written as *ny*, *nj* or *gn*.

These issues have led, for example, to highly anglicised placenames such as *Cammeray* [after the Kameraigal people], *Tom Groggin* [? from *tomarogin* 'water spider'], *Collector* [from *colegdar* or *caligda*], and *Tin Can Bay* [either from *tinchin* 'mangrove' or *tinken* 'kind of vine']. Indeed, most Indigenous-derived toponyms have been anglicised or corrupted, and often bear little resemblance to their original pronunciation, e.g. *Kurraca* from *katjekarr* 'white cockatoo', and *Langkoop* from *langap* 'hollow in the ground'.[4]

The meanings and referents[5] of names have also very often been misinterpreted or not recorded at all. Moreover, many Indigenous names were transplanted from the region of their original language to the far-flung reaches of the continent, thus making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine their origins and meanings. For instance, every State and Territory boasts places that carry the toponymic specifics *Wallaby* and *Kangaroo*, which derive from the Dharuk (Sydney) and the Guugu Yimidhirr (Cooktown, North Queensland) languages respectively. The practice of transplanting Indigenous names came about because the highly mobile European population during the nineteenth century carried with

them not only their personal belongings but placenames as well. Moreover, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the bestowal of names of Indigenous origin to places such as rural or outback post offices, railway stations and sidings was often carried out by bureaucrats (with little or no knowledge of local conditions or languages) in the States' capitals, using lists of so-called 'euphonious' Aboriginal words. No regard for their meaning or the language of origin was afforded them (Hodges 2007). A similar practice was used in New Zealand—Beattie (1915: 5) complains that the New Zealand Post Office and Railways were 'clapping on manufactured Māori names to places where we have no record of Māoris having ever lived.'

As I mentioned in Part 1, no Australian settlement name can be derived directly from the Indigenous toponymic network, since such features were not part of traditional Aboriginal culture. However, a form of the name may once have belonged to a nearby topographic feature—or it may be a generic word meaning 'spring' (such as *Brim* in Victoria) or even 'go away' (as in the Ballarat suburb of *Wendouree*) (Clarke & Heydon 2002). Europeans were not always conscious of whether a name was a placename—often it wasn't. Many Aboriginal-based placenames include words or parts of words which were then combined to form new placenames, making it extremely difficult to discern how many words were amalgamated, let alone the meanings of those words or parts of words.

There are a small number of named places in Australia (≈ 0.04% of all named places in the 2012 *Gazetteer of Australia*) that have an Introduced specific element and a general noun from an Aboriginal language functioning as the generic element.[6] The majority of these 'new-generics' refer to inland water features:[7]

- *billabong* 'a river branch that forms a backwater or stagnant pool' (e.g. *Horseshoe Billabong, Carrs Billabong, Bywash Billabong*)
- *yarp* 'lake' (in WA, e.g. *First Yarp*)
- *cowal* 'swampy hollow' (in NSW and QLD., e.g. *Dragon Cowal, Cranes Cowal*)
- *warrambool* 'watercourse (overflow channel), stream' (in NSW, e.g. *Chambers Warrambool, Duncan Warrambool*)
- *vari* 'stream' (in SA, only with Indigenous specifics, e.g. *Nguriyandharlanha Vari*)

- *cogie* 'a playa or lunette lake' (in NSW, e.g. *Dead Dog Cogie, McInnes Cogie*)
- *gnamma* 'waterhole' (in WA, e.g. *Figtree Gnamma Hole, Badjinterrin Gnamma Hole*)
- gilgai 'waterhole' (in NSW, e.g. the parish name *Red Gilgais*)

Many of these generics—*cowal, warrambool, cogie,* as well as *gnamma* and *gilgai* (types of waterhole)—are also frequently used as specifics in placenames, e.g. *Cowal Lagoon, Warrambool Creek, Cogie Creek, Gnamma Creek, Gilgai Gully.*

The current view of Aboriginal-derived placenames is quite different from that of the past: they are now regarded as an integral part of Australian national identity. Since the 1950s, indigenous names have been regularly bestowed on places (Kostanski 2003: 44). Bölling (2008) notes that 34 of the 80 suburbs with Indigenous-derived names in Melbourne (e.g. *Tarrawarra* and *Kurunjang*) were established in the twentieth century, predominantly in the city's outer regions which had previously maintained their native vegetation.

Since the 1990s, Australian geographic nomenclature authorities have exhibited a marked strengthening of intention to increase the number of names of Indigenous origin within the official placenaming system, and to represent them in a more accurate and respectful manner. In some instances, these developments have taken place within the context of an official policy on Aboriginal languages, such as that promulgated in NSW in 2001 (NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water 2009), or those currently under development in various States.

Other moves towards the increased use of placenames of Indigenous origin have come about in the context of language maintenance or language revival programs sponsored by Aboriginal organisations. These initiatives have generally received the support of the wider community, which is increasingly interested in Aboriginal culture and inclined to take pride in placenames of Indigenous origin as being uniquely Australian. This is not entirely a new sentiment, as a few traces of it may be found from early colonial times. The main processes involved in increasing the representation of Indigenous-based placenames are assigning names to hitherto 'unnamed' features, dual naming, and the changing of

names offensive to Indigenous people (e.g. the recent renaming of *The Niggerheads* to *The Jaithmathangs*).

The accurate recording of Aboriginal toponyms, their meanings and places of origin is, as Clark and Heydon (2002: 7) affirm: '[…] a valuable part of Aboriginal language research, retrieval, and restoration. This is particularly so in southeast Australia, where in many places, placenames constitute the largest surviving bodies of Indigenous language in widespread currency. Furthermore, they are an important component of Aboriginal cultural heritage […].'

A final note of caution

There are a number of publications (both in print and online) cataloguing Indigenous words and placenames. These usually make no effort to distinguish between one Aboriginal language and another. Rather, they classify all words and placenames as 'Aboriginal', as if to say there is only one Aboriginal language. This is not only wrong, but disrespectful. It is akin to listing English, German, Dutch, Danish, Polish, French, Spanish, Italian etc. words and placenames in one catalogue and labelling them as 'European'.

The meanings of the placenames given in such publications are often wrong or misleading. In fact the meanings of a vast number of Indigenous placenames are unknown or uncertain. This is made all too evident by the fact that the vast majority of Indigenous placenames in the State and national gazetteers do not and cannot document accurate meanings. Some of the reasons for this are outlined above.

So, when you look up an Aboriginal name or toponym in a popular publication, take the information you are given with a good dose of salt.

Jan Tent

Endnotes

1 I am not saying these are Indigenous names, but Indigenous-derived names or of Indigenous origin.

2 All of which occur in English: *fee, vase, thin, this, see, zoo, shoe, measure*, and *how* respectively.

3 The orthography is the conventional spelling system of a language.

4 For some excellent examples of variant spellings, as well as the difficulties in reconstructing Aboriginal placenames, refer to Koch (2009).

5 A 'referent' is the entity in the external world to which a linguistic expression refers.

6 Aboriginal toponyms typically do not have generic elements.

7 With the exception of *billabong* all have localised usage.

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Signs of the times

Our colleague and informant **Michele Lang** is an avid reader of the esteemed journal *Queensland Country Life*, which has recently reported another sighting of *signwriter's confusion.* Deadlock Creek is west of Blackall, but the chap who did the sign (on the right) clearly had somewhere more Caribbean in mind!