

CHAPTER 6

Toponymic books and the representation of Indigenous identities

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Always it is the names that work the most powerful magic ... They tell us not only where we want to go but where we have come from; clues to our past and the forces that have shaped the land we live in.

Brian Jackman, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 1988

Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Surveyor-General of the colony of New South Wales, Major Thomas Mitchell (1838: 174), had expressed the desire to use Indigenous names for places because they were the only ones deemed suitable to describe the Australian landscape. I have termed this colonial phenomenon of utilising Indigenous names for colonial places a process of *Anglo-Indigenous toponymy*, wherein the names once used exclusively for Indigenous landscape purposes were captured by colonial powers and used for their own means of identifying the landscape (Kostanski 2003, 2005). Towards the close of the nineteenth century when that formerly 'untamed wilderness' of Australian land had been claimed by colonists, a further process of Anglo-Indigenous identification developed in the form of homogenising the multiple pre-1788 cultures into one amorphous identity. In a sense, at this stage in the development of Australian identity, localised Anglo-Indigenous identification began to narrow into a more exclusively colonial and Australian phenomenon.

This paper will show how the nation-building project that characterised post-1901 Australian society can be linked to changing promotions of placenames of Indigenous origin. Ann McGrath (1989: 34) argued that this process led to the development of a contemporary cultural vacuum, where today Indigenous cultural heritage is discussed in an ill-informed manner. By tracking the development of generalist published toponymic reference books (and word

books which included lists of toponyms) the progression of multiple Indigenous identities becoming recognised as one fused identity, an 'Australian Aboriginal' identity, can be found. Eighteen toponymic reference books have been located for this paper, spanning a publishing period of 96 years from 1907 to 2002. It is proposed that the majority of toponymic reference books created in the twentieth century were informed by a culture of nation-building.

It should be noted that throughout the twentieth century there have been many distinguished historians and linguists who have researched Indigenous languages and their toponyms with careful diligence. These publications have been of tremendous use in promoting and preserving Indigenous cultures. They will not be the focus of this paper, which will prefer to look at the general reference publications which strayed from academic knowledge, and tended towards 'mainstream' audiences. This trait of publishing for a mainstream Australian audience had different effects on the reference publications and their representations of Indigenous cultures and languages.

Translation

One of the first comprehensive series of toponymic books to be published, which detailed different Aboriginal languages of Australia and their vocabularies, was compiled by Robert Smyth in 1878. Smyth collected vocabulary lists from local guardians of the Aborigines and settlers who wrote the names down, as he said, "exactly as the blacks pronounced them" (Smyth 1878: lxviii). Smyth proposed that the collections of

native names of the hills, rivers, creeks and other natural features [would] be accepted as important and valuable contributions and as such are likely to assist towards a better comprehension of the peculiarities of the Australian languages. (Smyth 1878: lxii)

Smyth was an ethnologist, and his work was influenced heavily by his preoccupations with studying the Aborigines of Australia as representatives of an ancient world.

In the preface to his first book, Smyth explained that he set out to detail information of the "people who had formerly owned the soil of Australia" Smyth (1878: v). Smyth insisted that different areas of the Australian landscape were referred to through different Aboriginal languages, and as such he made clear that multiple histories of landscape identification existed prior to colonial occupation. Indicating that Indigenous people were the former owners of the Australian landscape, and that at the time of writing "many of those that [had] formerly inhabited the banks of the River Murray, [had] disappeared" (Smyth 1878: xix),

Smyth asserted that his book was an attempt to “preserve some remnants of the history of the Australians” (Smyth 1878: vi). The ‘disappearance’ of the local Indigenous groups, and thus the vanishing of their oral traditions, obviated the need for colonists to materially record what they knew of Indigenous landscape interactions. This was in some ways the final chance for the settlers to record the meanings of various Indigenous traditions and nomenclature that they had adopted for their own use and incorporated into their own local vocabularies.

In his writings, Smyth argued that many of the placenames appropriated by colonial culture “have been mutilated or so altered as to be no longer of any significance” (Smyth 1878: lxviii). Therefore, Smyth was acknowledging the existence in Australia of an Anglo-Indigenous placename production, wherein the primary aim of adopting an Indigenous name for colonial landscape identification reflected an imperialist vision, overlooking or little concerned with the true meaning and significance of the names. Ronald Berndt (1970: 7) asserted that this form of cultural ignorance on the part of the colonists led to the socio-cultural impoverishment of the Indigenous people they were dispossessing. Thus, it can be stated that by using Indigenous names, without a complete understanding of their significance, colonists were undermining the importance of Indigenous landscape interactions.

Nine years later, Edward Curr published a similar book, comprising four volumes, which detailed various Indigenous dialects and their vocabularies. In much the same manner as Smyth, Curr’s books contained detailed lists of various Indigenous languages’ vocabularies with their English translations. Each list provided details of the compiler and explained the location of the language in Australia. Curr stated in his introduction to the work that in their publication, he was attempting to “demonstrate from the materials collected a number of facts connected with the long past history of this section of the human family” (Curr 1887: xi). Curr espoused the notion that “generally, the only reliable records of the early history of a savage race are its languages, customs, and physical characteristics, but particularly its languages” (Curr 1887: 3). Through providing multiple Indigenous word lists, and in some cases extended linguistic translations, Curr was emphasising, like Smyth, that various overlapping interactions of the landscape by Indigenous people had occurred prior to the claiming of the land by colonial powers. Curr’s main purpose was to contribute to an understanding of the origins of the Aboriginal people, on the assumption that their vocabularies could eventually be linked with those of people in other continents. In his work, Curr was also asserting that a rich national identity of Australia could be appreciated through the understanding of the multiple Indigenous cultures evident in Australia at the time of colonial expansion.

Sam Furphy has recently indicated that “aboriginal culture and heritage has been employed to confer Australian national identity” (Furphy 2002: 59). It can be stated that Curr’s attempts to publish a ‘history’ of the Indigenous tribes of Australia, was, in a sense, an attempt to bring a cultural and historical richness to the formative Australian identity of the late nineteenth century. Denis Byrne argued that at the time of Smyth and Curr’s publications “settler Australia was almost homogenous from an ethnic standpoint... what it lacked was historical depth” (Byrne 1996: 95).

The publication of these books highlights the attempts of some of the colonists to give depth to a formative Australian identity. They were arguing that multiple Indigenous cultures would provide the temporal depth new settlers so desired. As Joshua Fishman has asserted, in the process of nation-building the dominant culture often attempts to incorporate elements of a “far more distant (indeed, purely figurative) kin” to give them a historical identity that might not otherwise exist (Fishman 1972: 6). But while Smyth and Curr belonged to an ethnographic tradition concerned with accumulating detailed knowledge about local cultural differences among Aboriginal peoples - a concern with human diversity more generally - this was not the aim of new colonists in their own history making. As will now be discussed, Aboriginal knowledge served a different function for some of the writers of nomenclature reference books post-1901.

Federal translation

In 1900, E. J. Forbes addressed a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victoria), at which he outlined his desire to create geographical name boards for each state across Australia. He expressed the hope that these boards would control the creation of new Australian placenames; identify and correct placenames with spurious etymologies; and provide a regulatory method of placename spelling. Of the many points that Forbes raised in his speech, two can be said to have been extremely important in the later development of toponymic books. The first of these was that English appellations such as Swan Hill possessed the “valuable quality of accurate description and interesting record conveyed in our own language” (Forbes 1900: 26). The second of the points was that in the future any Australian Aboriginal word could be employed to describe place (Forbes 1900: 27). Forbes explained that this was the best methodology to employ in relation to the choice of Aboriginal placenames because there was such an extensive Australia-wide list of Aboriginal words compared to those lists confined to their original area. Thus, Forbes was asserting that the Australian identification of place needed to be asserted through English descriptions or non-specific Indigenous words.

Present at Forbes' address was Alan Wright who responded by stating that:

If the mere fact of Australian aboriginals having once wandered over this country entitles our languages to recognition, what are the claims of our own countrymen? For the anglo-saxon has been the real maker of Australia. History has no parallel for the progress and prosperity presented, all compressed into the limits of a single century... their towns ... should be designated by names, not given by the natives themselves, and often unavoidably incorrect, nor taken from the dialects of an extinct race who had no part in the work. (Wright cited in Forbes 1900: 27)

McGrath proposed that Wright was a Victorian who "argued that the colonising people should not separate "history" and "geography" and the only valid history was that of the colonisers" (McGrath 1989: 33). Indeed, McGrath argued that it was at this time in Australian history that the act of naming was seen by some as an assertion of their proprietorial rights. In fact, when Forbes and Wright's speeches of 1900 are compared to the outlines of Smyth's and Curr's works, a divide in the political philosophy of the two periods is evident. In contrast to the hopes outlined by Smyth and Curr, a multifarious promotion of Aboriginal cultures did not develop. Rather, a single, homogenous ideal was created in toponymic reference books with the impetus of people such as Forbes and Wright. It can be argued that post-federation, Australians were wanting to understand their land ownership in a singular, united and easy to comprehend manner, which was a part of what Eric Hobsbawm (1990: 102) referred to as a process of "cementing group cohesion". More recently, Mark McKenna has noted that

once the colonies federated on 1 January 1901 and the framework for the writing of a national history was in place, the desire to forget the violence of the frontier, or to at least dismiss it as an inevitable by-product of a far greater good, became stronger. McKenna (2002: 63)

This process of beginning a national history created new representations of Indigenous peoples and groups in Australia.

Nomenclature industry

One singular, self-serving colonialist approach to recording and preserving history is evident in the writings of John George Saxton in 1907. Entitled *Victorian Place Names and their Origins*, Saxton wrote in the preface that the aim of the book was to "provide a keynote of the past history of the State of Victoria, Australia" (Saxton 1907). The toponymic history presented by

Saxton was extremely generalist in nature. Aboriginal placenames were listed alphabetically in the left column of each page and on the right hand side were English translations. In contrast to Smyth's and Curr's publications, no references were provided by Saxton to specify the Indigenous languages of origin for the words, nor did he acknowledge the original language areas. Fishman (1972: 44) asserts that the individuality of a culture resides in its language. Following from this line of reasoning it can be argued that by removing the individuality and peculiarity of the languages and by forming them into one homogenous Aboriginal identity, the diversity of Indigenous cultures was erased from the dominant Australian culture, represented in Saxton's book. This homogenisation was a process of creating one group of 'others', one 'Aboriginal Australia'. Furphy has argued that nomenclature books such as Saxton's overlooked the importance of distinguishing various Indigenous dialects because they believed that "this diversity was not an important consideration when searching for a potential house name, and that no distinction between languages needed to be drawn in this context" (Furphy 2002: 60). Obviously, the promotion of forgotten meanings of placenames, which could add a formative depth to the national identity, was undertaken at the cost of linguistic accuracy.

From the example set by Saxton, other writers began to publish their own reference books on Australian placenames. Many took the same format as that adopted by Saxton, with a long list of toponyms on the left hand side of the page, and the English translations provided on the right without indication as to which Indigenous language they came from. The intentions and purposes of the books, the representations of Indigenous history and culture, the homogenisation of Indigenous language, and the reference books' own use of reference lists are fascinating topics to explore for the purposes of understanding the influences of these publications.

Intentions

In contrast to Smyth's and Curr's works, Archibald Martin stated that the intention of his placename book was to create "a first-rate gift book for anyone going on a journey or to keep on your shelves and bring out when places and people who lived in them are talked of and argued about" (Martin 1944: preface). Indeed, in the archives of the National Library of Australia a collection of manuscripts relating to the toponymic book writer, Les Blake, contains an inscription on the front page of the typescript for his book which states that "Sir Henry Winnecke, late Governor of Victoria told me: 'I always carry a copy of this book in the glove box of my car'" (Blake: Series 2, Folder 536: Box 88). Obviously the intentions of Martin to write a generalist reference work in the 1940s carried right through the genre of these books, even into the 1970s. In 1955 Rex Ingamells noted that

the purpose of his book was to create a “list for the entertainment and use of modern Australians who feel sufficient interest in the original Australians to delight in these echoes from their speech” (Ingamells 1955). These “echoes of speech” could provide modern Australians with words that according to Sydney Endacott “would ‘run trippingly’, and have a meaning or reference that might be used to name a particular place or thing” (Endacott 1973).

Two conclusions can be made from these discussions of mellifluous placenames. Firstly, by discussing the names only for their tonal qualities, not their cultural background, the toponymic book writers were trivialising the cultural importance of the placenames. Secondly, it was writing such as this that urged readers to recognise that multifarious Indigenous culture in Australia was dead and now a single homogenous identity could be formed through the use of Indigenous words for Australian places and homes. This is reflective of a phenomenon which cultural geographer Peter Jackson (1989: 53) described as “hegemonic” in nature, that is, an attempt by those with power to enforce a “norm”.

Byrne (1996: 87) argued that the existence of multiple Indigenous cultures was acknowledged in the post-federation period as a threat to colonial culture and its perceived right to be inhabiting Australia. Thus, rather than acknowledge Indigenous culture, and remain under threat of being considered illegitimate, colonists had to own the Indigenous interactions. Alexander Reed promoted this colonial approach by stating that his books were aimed at continuing a tradition where the toponyms were the “eternal totemic ancestors” of the Indigenous cultures (Reed 1967). Reed was espousing the notion that placenames were now totems of a dead Aboriginal culture to be used by the colonial powers. In so doing, he was promoting the idea that colonial culture owned Indigenous culture, and could utilise it any way it liked. Indeed, Paul James has observed that new societies use “traditional myths” to create a nationalist sentiment. It is, according to James, a method triggered by a “legitimation crisis” (James 1996: 128). Thus, in addition to the notion of creating group cohesion, we can interpret these early toponymic reference books as examples of an attempt to legitimise white control of the landscape through the appropriation of Aboriginal cultures and traditions.

Justine Kenyon pushed the notion of Anglo-Indigenous identification by claiming that for Australians searching for a house name with an Indigenous flavour:

Words may be made up. For instance, all words for ground or earth also indicate camp. Thus Lar, Larne, Langi all mean ground, camp or home, and may be used as a prefix similarly to that fine name Langilogan, or Mr. Logan’s homestead. (Kenyon 1951: 3)

Now not only were different Aboriginal languages to be used, but they could also be transformed in any manner. This manipulation of Indigenous words for placenames was stated by Endacott (1973: foreword) to be the foundations of “the growth of a distinct national feeling”. Jeremy Beckett (1988: 206), the Australian anthropologist, espoused the notion that writers often utilised Aborigines in forming a contemporary national ideology, and that was the only reason they used them. Indeed, Beckett insisted that nationalising forces such as writers never envisaged the incorporation of distinct Aboriginal cultures into the national identity; they only needed them as an ‘other’ to give meaning to ‘us’. This utilisation of Indigenous cultures in developing a national identity is a process which can be seen in nomenclature books. For instance, Ingamells proposed that

since most aboriginal speech has passed forever, never to be spoken again in proper dialect, here are simply memorials that may be freely used and may fitly lend colour to our transplanted European life in this country. (Ingamells 1955: foreword)

In addition, Endacott stated that the use of “musical aboriginal names” for homes and places “would be desirable with advantage to the furthering of the growth of a distinct national feeling” (Endacott 1973: preface). Even as recently as 1994, when the *Macquarie Aboriginal Words* book was published, the editors implored readers to “reflect the distinctive character of the Australian landscape, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are an obvious and wealthy store of such names” (Thieberger and McGregor 1994: vi). Another manner in which these books helped the process of cultural homogenisation was with their vague representations of Indigenous languages, a practice which continued until the publication of *Dictionary of Aboriginal Placenames of Victoria* by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation of Languages in 2002.

It has been noted (Strang 1997: 219) that Aboriginal placenames refer to specific ancestral stories. Thus, the cultural heritage of a place can reside in the language-specific placename. Therefore, in discussing placenames of Indigenous origin, one needs to consider the language and cultural background of the name in order to appropriately translate the meaning into English. Considering the format of the toponymic books, this is an ideology that was not addressed within the word lists themselves, yet this type of definition of Indigenous culture was almost always represented in their introductions. For instance, James O’Callaghan wrote that “the words may have belonged to one or other of the many native languages then existing”. Furthermore, he argued that many placenames had spurious beginnings; that different languages were present Australia-wide; and that some placenames had been corrupted into unrecognisable forms from their original. Yet, given his acknowledgement of and explanation about multiple Indigenous cultures having existed in Australia

pre-1788, O’Callaghan concluded his introduction by stating that “if a name did not originate in the place which bears it, information as to such origin is interesting, but unnecessary” (O’Callaghan 1918: 6). Thus, O’Callaghan’s word lists were plunged into linguistic obscurity, where English translations were provided for Indigenous words without any identification of the languages of origin, and only occasional references to the sources of information.

Unfortunately, O’Callaghan was not alone in this trend of acknowledgment and simultaneous denial. Moreover, it was a trend that was to persist across the century. In 1940, William Thorpe warned readers of his book that “the multiplicity of dialects explains the frequent occurrence of different names with the same meaning” (Thorpe 1940: 1). Simultaneously, Thorpe did not explain the different dialects, nor did he attempt to acknowledge them next to the translations provided in the word lists further on in the book. More interestingly, by the 1950s, the multiplicity of languages once referred to in these texts, was now beginning to be defined as either “nine dialects” by Kenyon (1951: 3) (so you could pick a house name common to your area), or given a “regional key” by Ingamells (1955). By 1967, Reed had developed these generalisations into state boundary lines, indicating next to each placename the state of its location, whilst still acknowledging that:

There were at least five hundred languages or distinct dialects, many of which have never been recorded ... it must be remembered that a single word may have had more than one meaning in one language, and that the same word may have borne an entirely different meaning in another.
(Reed 1967: foreword)

Whilst the lack of acknowledgment of local Indigenous languages in these books caused the promotion of a homogenous Aboriginal identity, the structure of the toponymic books has also frustrated the process of placename verification, by providing spurious, scant or, at times, no reference lists.

Referencing problems

The only toponymic reference book produced which gave any indication of the exact sources of the translations was O’Callaghan’s (1918), who quoted often from Smyth (1878) and Curr (1887), and interlaced this information with private, unpublished material from local sources. O’Callaghan would place a direct reference next to each toponymic translation, thus aiding the reader in following up the sources and also allowing the reader to find more information on that particular toponym.

During the early part of the twentieth century, books by Saxton (1907), Thorpe (1921, 1940), Martin (1944) and Kenyon (1951) contained no references at all. The lack of referencing in these books can cause spurious etymologies to arise (Kostanski 2005) and acts as a hindrance to researchers. It is a hindrance because it does not allow the researcher to verify where the translations came from. Thus, there can be no method applied to these books in sorting the correct translations from those that are spurious. In effect, poor referencing in these books allows the promotion of both correct and spurious etymologies to a wide and general audience, with no distinctions being possible to be made between them.

By 1967 references were being mentioned by Reed in the introduction to his book. Then from Aldo Massola in 1968 onwards these types of toponymic books had extensive reference lists. Yet, the rigour with which these lists were compiled remained less than sound. Of these later editions, the most interesting reference lists were compiled by Massola (1968) and Blake (1977). Both of these referenced the previously published toponymic books by Martin (1944), O'Callaghan (1918), Reed (1967), Saxton (1907), Smyth (1878) and Curr (1887). Obviously, Massola and Blake were making extensive use of the prior research undertaken by toponymic authors. In addition to these toponymic reference book sources, Massola's references were quite extensive and he appears to have utilised many journal articles for information. On the other hand, Blake (1977: 295) referenced a "selection of local histories checked" which was an interesting methodology considering many of these local histories he 'checked' would have utilised the same reference books as Blake had also done. Interestingly, accessing Blake's manuscripts at the National Library of Australia (Blake: Folder 215, Box 237), and paying particular attention to the drafts of his book, provides substantial evidence of his lack of referencing rigour. It is obvious that Blake did not methodically substantiate his placenames translations. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the proofs of his book, in which no mention of referencing for each name was made. Thus, the lack of referencing was not stipulated at the publisher's discretion, rather by Blake himself. It would appear that even as late as the 1960s authors such as Blake were following the same methodology stipulated by Saxton in 1907, and thus continued to perpetuate the ideology of homogenisation of Indigenous landscape interactions.

Conclusions

The toponymic reference books published during the twentieth century were far from innocuous in their representation and treatment of Indigenous cultures. These books are still held in State and local libraries across Australia, usually in the general reference sections. The information contained within the

publications is still being utilised by local historians and people with an interest in the toponymic history of Australia, and as such the scope and influence of these books' contents is far-reaching.

The toponymic books discussed in this paper have almost exclusively represented Indigenous Australian cultures from a colonially-tainted perspective, one which has prized the Indigenous toponyms for their ability to give a depth to Australian national identity. This national-building tendency tended to influence the toponymic reference writers to homogenise Indigenous culture into one amorphous entity, a process which at once removed the individuality of Indigenous languages (and thus cultural identity) and enforced non-Indigenous landscapes as the 'norm'. Certain elements of this singular Indigenous entity were selected to be discussed within a colonial framework, with no real consideration given to the original non-Anglo-Indigenous meanings. Recent toponymic publications are working on correcting the oversights made by the toponymic writers of the twentieth century, and hopefully there will be a flow-on effect in Australian national identification with Indigenous cultures.

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