

CHAPTER 13

Placenames of central Australia

Early European records and recent experience

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Early European records 1839-1901

Introduction

The naming of places usually has some significance with them. A hill, a waterhole or a watercourse may be helpful as landmarks, or as drinking places in their journeys, consequently they bear a name, but objects that serve no useful purpose to them will have no name. It has often been a puzzle to travellers to obtain the native name of some feature of interest. To the native that object may have no interest, and for that reason may never have been named; or, if so, the name being so rarely used, is only known to the old men, who are the geographers of the tribe. 'Locality' is 'largely developed' in all of them as an instinct, and from earliest youth the perceptive and reasoning faculties are trained for the dual purposes of getting about the country and tracking everything that walks or creeps for food. Locality and perception, then, are specialised in every native; in some more than in others. It is a hereditary trait, developed through many generations, and thereby much specialised. (Chewings 1900: 3)

So wrote the central Australian explorer-pastoralist-geologist Charles Chewings in 1900.

How these understandings had developed in the previous 60 years is the subject of the first part of this study, which looks at early European explorers, travellers and bush workers in Central Australia.

Central Australia is defined as that area between Oodnadatta and Tennant Creek in a south-north line, and from border to border east-west in the Northern Territory, with an equivalent extension into northern South Australia, and a bit of blurring about the edges.

Governor Gawler 1839, Sturt, Giles and Warburton

In October 1839 Governor George Gawler of Adelaide, South Australia, from which city and colony all early explorers of central Australia, Leichhardt excepted, set out, “actively promoted the application of Aboriginal placenames”. They were to be “inserted in the public maps” when “clearly proved to be correct” (Amery and Williams 2002: 255-256). This order by Government Gazette was followed where the Europeans and local Aborigines had long enough associations for each to learn the others’ languages. It was not possible, however, to follow the order when neither could understand the other, which was the normal situation at first contact beyond the frontier of invasion-settlement. The order was also not followed: when the explorers deliberately dissuaded any major contact, as with Sturt in 1844-1845 and many others; when their sponsors desired their own or other European names (not excluding state governors) to be perpetuated, as with Giles in the early 1870s; when the explorers thought it prudent to name features after their sponsors or other well-known figures (e.g. Warburton in the early 1870s); or when the explorers wished to acknowledge other members of their party, including horses or dogs, or members of their own family (probably universal).

Stuart 1860, Jarvis 1864-1866, and John Ross and Alfred Giles 1869-1870

The first Europeans to enter what is central Australia from the South were John McDouall Stuart and party in 1860. During earlier probes well to the south in 1858-1859, Stuart refers to the many Aboriginal names already on record as a result of the work of earlier explorers. He used an Aboriginal man as a member of one expedition, which allowed him limited recording of more Aboriginal placenames, and managed minor discussion with Aborigines who had previously had brief contact with Europeans (Hardman 1975). However, when traversing central Australia he only had other Europeans as members of his party, so his only references which use Aboriginal words (not local Aboriginal placenames) of any kind were clearly learnt from much further south; “mulga scrub”, “kangaroo” and “wirilies” (wurlies) are examples (J. B. 1983).

Stephen Jarvis followed Stuart’s route north in 1864, having heard from Arabana Aborigines who were at Mount Margaret that there was a very large permanent water called ‘Macumba’ in the vicinity of present-day Oodnadatta –

the latter a placename derived from a clump of mulga several kilometres north of the town, and meaning 'mulga blossoms', which was not recorded until much later (sighted reference by Jarvis; see also Manning 1986: 122, 157).

Jarvis and his stockmen took stock to the waterhole in the drought which followed in 1865-1866. Then in 1869 and early 1870 the station-manager and explorer John Ross, apparently guided by an Arabana man, formed a sheep-station called 'Manaria'/'Mannaria' in the same area (Alec Ross 1928; Symes 1958: 54-55). 'Manaria'/'Mannaria' is the modern Manarrinna, the name of a hill and a big waterhole on the Woodmurra/Frew Creek near the far north-west corner of Lake Eyre. The first Arabana central Australian placename recorded by any European was thus 'Macumba' in 1864-1866. This name means 'the fire-track' and applies to the Macumba River (Hercus and Simpson 2002: 18; Manning 1986: 122). It was probably not formally recorded until some years later. Moravian and Lutheran missionaries at Killalpaninna and Kopperamanna may well have been the first to do so (see e.g. Jones 2002).

In 1870, when exploring hundreds of kilometres ahead of the Overland Telegraph Line construction crews, Ross mentions Koorakarinna Waterhole on Frew's Creek – for the first time on 16 August 1870. It is actually a little way to the south-east of the Frew on the Koorakarina Creek. Presumably it had been named during the 1864-1869 period, as with Algebuckina Waterhole and 'Cadnia-owie' Creek and Hill much further west, by the present Oodnadatta track: these are referred to on 16-17 November 1870 (Ross n.d.). Alfred Giles, a member of the expedition, kept a much more detailed – though not normally dated – account, in which he stated that the name for Frew's Creek was 'Cookoolinah' (Giles 1995: 18) and, in addition to Algebuckina Waterhole refers to the 'Adminga Creek' (Giles 1995: 65): this name has survived in a more correct form as Abminga, which means 'snake-track' in Lower Arrernte.

'Koorakarinna' and 'Cookoolinah' are one and the same creek, but at different locations: Arabana people referred to the lowest part of the Koorakarinna Creek, near where it floods out, as *Kukurlanha*. In Arabana *kukurla* was the name of a plump little bandicoot, *Isoodon obesulus*. Unfortunately the placename 'Cookoolinah' has not survived on modern maps: the area around the *Kukurlanha* (lower Koorakarinna) Creek was of special importance to Arabana people because of a manganese quarry, and that was probably why the lowest portion of the creek had a special name. This shows how easily Aboriginal names can get wiped off the map, even when they have been recorded.

Giles also mentioned two waterholes which could easily be mistaken for Aboriginal placenames, namely "'Winkey's Waterpool', named after the blackfellow who showed it to Mr. Ross" (Giles 1995: 65); and 'Wow-wow

Waterhole' on Giles Creek (east of Alice Springs), named so because the Arrernte Aborigines met there "had a peculiar way of terminating their sentences with a loud 'Wugh wugh' or 'Wow wow'" (Giles 1995: 30).

It is quite clear that Ross was able to make himself understood to Arabana Aborigines who had previously had minimal contact at Umbum station (south of the Oodnadatta area), and both his and Giles' accounts of contact with Eastern Arrernte Aborigines at waters near the flood-out end of the Todd River country indicate that Ross did his best to talk to them. However, while unable to comprehend the spoken language, he understood them when they used sign language to indicate the direction of other waters, and when they also used signs to indicate that they wanted the Ross party and their horses to leave the waterhole.

A cautiously friendly meeting on a waterhole on the Waite River (north-north-east of Alice Springs) on 25 December 1870 resulted in the record: "a fine young boy of 6 years conversed with me and I only wish I could understand what he said" – a point also made or intimated about other occasional meetings.

W. C. Gosse 1873

W. C. Gosse and his party explored broadly west of Alice Springs. His first Yankuntjatjara word, *carpee* (i.e. *kapi*) for water, was recorded on 4 August 1873 at Ayer's Rock, as he called Uluru, being otherwise unable to comprehend the language (Gosse 1973: 11). Further south, on 8 November 1873 in the Musgrave Ranges in northern South Australia, he recorded the creek-line and water connection as follows:

These natives call a creek 'caroo'; they pointed down this calling out, 'carpee caroo! carpee caroo,' to make us understand that water was further down. (Gosse 1973: 19)

This appears to be the first clear record of other than the hand-sign indications of the nature and whereabouts of a 'creek' and 'water' in any central Australian language, and was a step in the learning of placenames that is often enough implied in the records, but was not essential if an explorer met Aborigines who led them to or were camped at a water, and the parties were able to make themselves well enough understood to one another. Gosse later gives other examples upon his return to the vicinity of the Overland Telegraph Line which are of this nature, the guides having had minor prior contact with Europeans of the Overland Telegraph Line, and presumably being local Antakirinya people (Tindale 1974: 210, map).

On the Alberga River he refers to the “emu drinking place”, apparently his own description rather than a translation of an Aboriginal name, before meeting Aborigines who “spoke of some water lower down the creek, calling it ‘Powi’”. He camped at ‘The Alberga Olarinna Well’ (apparently already established as a European well at a traditional water of that name). He was guided to Appatinna Waterhole “which I have called by its native name”, and similarly to Murdarinna Waterhole, and was then further guided to Carpamoongana Waterhole on the Hamilton Creek (Gosse 1973: 20-23).

‘Larapinta’, the Finke River, 1872-1890

Between 4 and 12 August 1872, while camped at Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station, the explorer Ernest Giles was the first ‘outsider’ to record the Arrernte name for the Finke River. He had discussions during this time with Southern Arrernte Aborigines, who had begun to learn English through contact with Europeans associated with the telegraph line and repeater stations, and recorded:

During our stay at the Charlotte I inquired of a number of the natives for information concerning the region beyond, to the west and north-west. They often used the words Larapinta and plenty black fellow. (Giles 1979 vol. 1: 7-8)

Although he did not immediately comprehend what ‘Larapinta’ meant, on 28 August 1872, when well north on the Finke, he noted in his diary that he met two Aboriginal men who had evidently had a fleeting association with Overland Telegraph Line construction workers or staff:

We made an attempt at a long conversation, but signally failed, for neither of us knew many of the words the other was saying. The only bit of information I obtained from them was their name for the river – as they kept continually pointing to it and repeating the word Larapinta. This word, among the Peake and Charlotte natives, means a snake, and from the continued serpentine windings of this peculiar and only Central Australian river, no doubt the name is derived. (Giles 1979 vol. 1: 17)

Although the modern spelling is different, Giles was correct in his Arrernte name for the river, but not quite correct in its meaning. Certainly the course of the river is perceived as having been made by a gigantic mythological snake but, as will be seen, that is not the literal meaning of Larapinta (this original spelling is retained in the name Larapinta Drive, a deliberate choice of name for the main exit road west from Alice Springs, as it takes one to the Finke River at Hermannsburg. Other Arrernte street-names in Alice Springs appear to have been chosen much more randomly from an old glossary).

During the period 1872-1877 the first pastoral properties were established on the Finke River, one of them being Hermannsburg Mission. As soon as possible the Lutheran missionaries and lay-workers began learning the Western Arrernte language, and during an early reconnaissance of the area in July 1876, Heidenreich appears to have been the first to have confirmed the Western Arrernte name of the Finke River.

After evening devotion they sprawled out to sleep on the sandy riverbed of the Finke River, which (Heidenreich says) the native people called the earth's Milky Way on account of its multitudinous white sand, and from which the heavenly Milky Way was thought to derive. The native name for the Finke was 'Lara Beinta.' (Scherer 1975: 44)

Scherer, who translated the old German records, adds that 'Lara Beinta' "[properly] – means 'Salt River'" (Scherer 1975). This translation is widely accepted, in that, except in flood, the Finke contains certain waterholes that are constantly salty ('Salt Hole' is the European name of one of the largest, a short distance north of Glen Helen in the head-water country), and during drought even the normally long-lasting fresh waterholes become brackish – a fact recorded in detail by missionary L. Schulze (1891: 211-213). In a very brief note Schulze also touches on the Western Arrernte belief about the Milky Way: "The Milky Way they term 'Ulbaia' – i.e., water-course" (Schulze 1891: 221). The word *ulbaia* is an alternative for *lara*, and in modern linguistic orthodoxy the words are spelt *ulpaye* and *lhère* (Henderson and Dobson 1994: 729).

However, aside from surveyor-explorer Charles Winnecke's variant spelling of June 1886, 'Larra-Pinta' (Winnecke 1890: 1), another complexity was also noted in the early records. On 1 July 1886, Rev. H. Kempe of Hermannsburg Mission wrote a letter to F. E. H. W. Krichauff, who translated it and had it published. He noted "The Finke is called 'Lirambenda'. 'Lira' is creek, and 'mbenda' permanent water and spring" (Krichauff 1886: 77).

These few examples indicate the difficulty for researchers attempting to interpret placenames from limited old ethnographic records, particularly once a language has become extinct – a point well made by several writers in Hercus et al. (2002).

Tietkens 1889

Although, as indicated, the explorer Ernest Giles and then the Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg had begun to consider the meanings of Aboriginal placenames, it required the local Aborigines to have had considerable contact with Europeans, and therefore to have learnt considerable 'bush English', before the few *interested* Europeans generally began to comprehend anything about

the meanings of placenames. The explorer W. H. Tietkens, who had shared many experiences on great explorations with Giles, provides an interesting little glimmer on such understandings, yet in the main simply accepted the placenames without attempting to obtain further details.

Tietkens had as one of his exploration party “a black-tracker (Billy, from the ranks of the native police at Alice Springs)”, who – later evidence reveals – was a Matuntara man from considerably further south in the Erldunda area. It is clear that he was of great assistance to the party throughout, but that, although he had been west at least to the general Glen Helen area (he identified Mount Sonder for Tietkens), he did not provide Aboriginal placenames throughout the early western travel.

Their first camp was north of Alice Springs at Painta Spring, then by following the northern side of the ranges westwards they came to the second of the Glen Helen homesteads, on the Davenport Creek. Here there was a small resident group of Western Arrernte Aborigines as well as the European manager and station-hands. On 10 April 1889 Tietkens recorded:

Interviewing the most intelligent natives I ascertained the native names of the principal local geographical features to be: Mount Sonder, Oorichipima; Mount Razorback, Oora-tunda; Mount Giles, Um-bat-thera; Davenport Creek, Indianana; Haast’s Bluff Range, Nyurla; Mount Zeil, Willatrika, Mount Crawford, Mareena; creek under Mount Sonder, Oorachilpilla. Oora means fire, and it is somewhat singular that Mounts Sonder and Razorback and the creek of Mount Sonder should all commence with this word. (Tietkens 1993[1891]: 11)

One might say that Tietkens was correctly sniffing the breeze at this time.

Their route then lay westerly via the Arumbara Creek, Nyurla (Haasts Bluff), and then, from an Aboriginal guide from Glen Helen “who was now further in this direction than he had ever been before”, Tietkens learnt that they were at Mareena Bluff, at the northeastern end of which was “a spring called Enditta” (Tietkens 1993[1891]: 13. See later for Winnecke’s spelling, ‘Mereenie’, which is the Luritja owner’s pronunciation of the time of the Western Arrernte’s Mareena).

This was the last of the Aboriginal placenames recorded until, upon their return from Lake MacDonal on the Western Australian border on a more southerly route, they arrived at Erldunda station. Here the European manager told Tietkens that “the highest point in the Erldunda Range is called Ippia by the blacks” (Tietkens 1993: 61). The country now being known to Billy, he guided them to Koolida Spring (later recorded as Coolatta), one of several springs in close proximity, then Elinburra Springs, and via the “many pretty places there”

of his country, as Billy put it, to Imbunyerra Soakage, then into the station and Overland Telegraph Line country at Eringa Waterhole and Charlotte Waters (Tietkens 1993[1891]: 63-67).

Charles Winnecke 1877-1894

Charles Winnecke, as surveyor-explorer, probably traversed as much country in central Australia as any explorer in the period 1870s-1890s. His recording of placenames is as illustrative as any explorer-surveyor of the era under consideration.

When he had been preceded in his survey work by earlier explorers and early pastoralists, he simply plotted the names as they had already been recorded. Most of these were European placenames – the earliest Europeans not having been able to comprehend the traditional owners and vice versa – but by 1878 a few in the vicinity of Alice Springs had been given their Arrernte names. These were Mount Undoolya and Undoolya cattle-station to the immediate east of Alice Springs; Painta Springs to the close north; and nearby Puerta Curla (Winnecke 1882: 2-3). 'Painta' means 'salt', as earlier noted; thus while it was probably descriptive of the water and was not necessarily the original placename, it has, over the intervening 125 years, become the name accepted by local Arrernte people and Europeans alike. (Mounted Constable W. H. Willshire provides an early alternative, 'At-no-rambo' (Willshire 1888: 27), which is probably the original old Arrernte name, but it appears to have fallen out of use.

In his further extensive travels north and east of Alice Springs, both around the northern fringes of the Simpson Desert and north to Tennant Creek, then east across the southern Barkly Tableland country to Queensland, Winnecke was unable to record the names used by Aborigines who were encountered at waterholes and native wells, which is a pity. His only reference of linguistic interest, recorded on 17 October 1878, is to a native well a considerable distance north-east of Alice Springs:

In a short time, seeing no water coming in to the well, they commenced making a horrible noise, constantly shouting 'Murra co-ki-ja', and getting more and more excited. (Winnecke 1882: 6)

The situation improved remarkably when, on his return to survey work in the Queensland border country in 1883, he began to use Aboriginal guides. This led to an extensive list of references, which, because they include a wider range of physical features than waterholes (though the latter predominate), are now considered.

Winnecke's first Aboriginal assistant was 'Moses', who must have been of the Yarluyandi people of the extreme south-eastern Simpson Desert country judging by his knowledge of country and by the information from Tindale (Tindale 1974: 212, map). He appears to have been a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, although he would have been in at least his mid-thirties if he is, as is possible, the one-and-the-same 'Moses' associated with W. C. Gosse's explorations of 1873 (Gosse 1973[1874]: 1). One can presume that he had left his country in the late 1860s while he was a boy, the family presumably drawn to the exciting potential (as against dangers) of the sheep and cattle stations which were being developed at that time in what later became known as the Birdsville Track country. His task, as was the case with local Aborigines employed by all explorers, was to "point out some waters" along the intended route, which was to link with recent exploration-survey work in the Queensland-South Australia-Northern Territory corner country. Thus, on leaving the Birdsville Track at Cowarie station, Moses guided the party to Kirrianthana Waterhole near the junction of the Derwent Creek with the Warburton River. Then, after a tortuous route at the end of which "a high sandridge, about one mile to the north-east of the well, – called Minkakunna" almost certainly acted as Moses' latter-stage directional guide, to Pooliadinna Well. They next climbed Minkakunna "from which an extensive view all round was obtained" before travelling towards "a well – which he called 'Mickery Pompomponah'". Winnecke does not at this stage appear to have realised that 'mickery' was the term for 'well' in the language of his guide: it is an early European record of the word. While he knew the general location of the well, and was able to guide Winnecke to two small waters (the names of which Winnecke unfortunately does not record) along the traditional travelling route, Moses became 'lost' when nearing it because "he had not seen it or been in this country since he was a little boy". Winnecke, using plans drawn up by a previous surveyor, was able to lead them on to the well. Since it is an early description of a 'mickery', Winnecke's account of 18 August 1883 is now given.

[We] arrived at the waterhole, which is caused by a break in a sandridge; it is almost circular, and about thirty yards in diameter, and from six to eight feet deep when full; at present it only contains about an inch of liquid and putrid mud, with which, however, we were glad to fill our casks; it has a most vile taste, and caused us all to vomit violently. (Winnecke 1884)

Their route now took them via Minna Hill (previously triggered) to a waterhole "which the natives called Matamurna and Murdamaroo", but which Winnecke called "Warman's Well, after my camel-man". Murdamaroo is the name that has survived on modern maps, not the name of the camel-man.¹

At this stage Moses deserted the party, not it seems because he was at the limits of his known country, but because Winnecke intended to travel north-westerly into a region Moses had previously “declared – to be all salt lakes and sandridges”. This is an interesting comment, which suggests that Moses knew well the nature of the country, probably through knowledge told to him by his parents and grandparents, but also quite possibly because in his childhood he had learnt that it was only visitable after exceptional rains.

Thereafter Winnecke, in pushing north-westward proved the truth of Moses’ knowledge and, after visiting Poeppel’s Corner on 24 August and continuing north-north-west for nearly two days, veered north-north-east and east for four more days before striking “the Mulligan River at the most westerly bend, and near a fine large and permanent waterhole”.

Following this, in September-October 1883, he used another Aboriginal guide when travelling westerly from Sandringham station, situated on Bindiacka Waterhole on the eastern Simpson Desert edge.

I have a black boy, who has been named ‘Blucher’, mounted before me on my camel; he has expressed his willingness to act as our pilot into the country to the westward; but as he cannot speak a word of English, and moreover his only knowledge of the country consists in what has been told him by other natives, I presume he will not be a very valuable acquisition to the party. (Winnecke 1884: 5)

Winnecke probably over-stated the case a little, and effectively acknowledged his error by indicating that ‘Blucher’ was an excellent go-between with Aborigines who were met during travels. He clearly understood their language and was able to assist Winnecke to a considerable degree.

Their route took them from Bindiacka via Boboreta Claypan and Biparee Springs to Boolcoora Spring, near which were Tintagurra Claypan and Springs. Although he lost his perceptions of locality in a dust-storm, and passed one group of springs he appeared not to know, ‘Blucher’ was able to additionally name Montherida Spring, Alnagatar Spring, Cunja Spring and Apinga Creek – the latter virtually on the Northern Territory-Queensland border. After this ‘Blucher’ conversed with Aborigines who were encountered, which resulted in the party being guided to waters. These, as they continued westerly into the Northern Territory and for a time north along a creek, were Woonunajilla Swamp, Walcataman Waterhole, Tinnargee Waterhole, Mircirrow Waterhole, Wonadinna Waterhole, Mur-pronga Waterhole and Alanajeer Waterhole. Here ‘Blucher’ became very ill, and desired to return to Bindiacka. There is no doubt that this was a genuine illness, but it also undoubtedly marked the limits of country with which his kinfolk had any strong ties. They were then in the

near eastern vicinity of the Hay River, which Winnecke named, along with several prominent hills, after Europeans. All other points west to the Overland Telegraph Line were those earlier named by him and Surveyor Barclay after Europeans (Winnecke 1883: 6-8).

Although Winnecke appears not to have had any interest in what the traditional names meant, and in any case may well have been unable to understand 'Blucher' had he attempted to indicate a meaning, the advantage of having a local area Aboriginal guide and go-between to record central Australian Aboriginal placenames is well illustrated by this journey.

The focus on waters is a natural one in desert country, but their variant nature is indicated, and in central Australian terms Winnecke was one of the earliest to also record that a prominent sandhill could have a name.

By 1894, when Winnecke was survey leader of the Horn Scientific Expedition to central Australia, some of the Arabana and Southern Arrernte Aborigines had had 30 years of contact with Europeans; the majority by far of the rest had had 10 to 24 years contact; and the remaining few groups had almost certainly had intermittent peripheral contact (see Stirling 1994: 12 for a complementary note). Although Winnecke applied a large number of European names to features, he also noted that "[throughout] the journey I have endeavoured to obtain the aboriginal appellations for all objects [physical features] seen" (Winnecke 1995: 40). Thus certain of the Aboriginal placenames previously recorded, as well as several in a western loop between Watarrka (Kings Canyon) and Glen Helen, were recorded for the first time. Illustrative of the earlier references is his report that "Idracowra is the native name of Chambers Pillar, and Udrat-namma for the old station" (Winnecke 1995[1897]: 17). During the loop westerly from Kings Creek he used two local Aboriginal men, Mennamurta and 'Arabi Bey' (a word-play on his true name Arrarbi) as assistants to the party, and was thus able to learn that the Luritja name for Giles' Tarn of Auber was 'Toonker-bungia' (which today is recorded as Tjunkupu). He recorded the name Babamamma for the range whose highest point he named Mount Tate, and additionally named Mereenie Bluff, Range and Valley, "– the name 'Mereenie' – [as with all other traditional names] derived from the natives", Tooringoa Waterhole, Oolooroo Waterhole, "a large rain water hole, called Oondoomolla", and Annaldie Waterhole (Winnecke 1995[1897]: 33-40). He unfortunately became confused about the names for three key features near present-day Papunya, stating that "the words given by different natives are totally at variance" (his ability to understand the guides was insufficient for him to comprehend the significance of the differences), and that they "seem to have no particular name for these imposing geographical features" (Winnecke 1995[1897]: 40). Consequently he named them "Mount Edward, Mount William, and Mount Francis after the brothers, Messrs. Edward, William, and Francis Belt respectively, and the range

to which they belong the Belt Range.” Winnecke’s further record of Aboriginal placenames was Ana-loorgoon Soakage, Koondunga Cave, Arumbera Creek and Andantompantie Waterhole, after which they reached Glen Helen and his Aboriginal guides returned to their home country on Tempe Downs station.

As is evident throughout the preceding records, Winnecke did not record the meaning of the names. This was left to other members of the Horn Scientific Expedition, namely the anthropologist, Sir Edward Stirling; the local ethnographer Frank Gillen (in charge of Alice Springs Telegraph Station); and zoologist Professor (later Sir) Baldwin Spencer, who evidently drew a little of his knowledge from accompanying Aboriginal guides, and confirmed and added to that knowledge with the assistance of Gillen. Even so, direct translations of the placenames were not attempted at this time so much as a recording of the details of the associated mythology (e.g. see Spencer 1994[1896]: 50 for a brief account of the mythology of Chambers Pillar and nearby Castle Rock).

Stirling and other ethnographers to and beyond 1894

Sir Edward Stirling, anthropologist to the Horn Scientific Expedition, appears to have been the first to apply a scientific “System of Orthography for Native words”, drawing it directly from the Royal Geographical Society of London (Stirling 1994: 138-139). Although he introduced this orthography, and it was used in the Horn Scientific Expedition’s publications (with the exception of Winnecke’s account), it was rarely followed by the ethnographers of the day. Part of the problem was that many placenames, over the majority of central Australia, had already been formally applied to the maps. Furthermore, the Lutherans naturally enough followed a Germanic tradition, characterised by the *y* sound (of English ‘yes’) being written ‘j’ as in ‘ja’ (German for ‘yes’). Meanwhile, most other ethnographers used a system based on the value of letters as they are used in English. Virtually no-one understood that Aboriginal words often started with consonant clusters such as ‘nd’: hence, in trying to record this sequence, English recorders almost universally commenced the word with ‘Un’, as in Undoolya/Ndolya (to retain two older spellings). Furthermore in words commencing with ‘ng’ (the velar nasal η) this nasal is omitted altogether or written as ‘gn’. The examples can be multiplied many times over, but it is to Stirling’s credit that he at least introduced the idea of scientific recording.

Spencer, Gillen, Cowle and Byrne 1894-1899

By the time of the publication of the Horn Scientific Expedition’s volumes in 1896, many Aboriginal placenames, particularly waters of any kind – but also major features such as mountains, rivers and creeks – were known to Europeans. However, the fine detail of the Aboriginal landscape was barely comprehended

at all, in part because strenuous and prolonged hours of work allowed little time for investigation, and in part because Aborigines were considered 'primitive' and therefore with little to offer beyond excellent tracking skills, and assistance as house-maids, shepherds and stockmen. Although he still considered Aborigines primitive (as with almost all other Europeans of the era), Sir Baldwin Spencer of Melbourne University had been stimulated by his experiences on the Horn Scientific Expedition. He was the first to consider the possibility that Aborigines had far more complex societies, including links to the land, than any other outsider had previously realised. He also knew that if he were to scientifically comprehend these matters he needed assistance. Thus three intelligent men, who had been friends in the Centre for one to two decades, were enlisted as Spencer's field assistants. These men were F. J. Gillen, officer-in-charge at Alice Springs Telegraph Station, and formerly at Charlotte Waters for 12 years; Mounted Constable C. E. Cowle of Illamurta police camp, well to the south-west of Alice Springs; and P. M. Byrne of Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station (e.g. see Gillen 1968; Mulvaney et al. 2000; Spencer and Gillen 1968). Between them they contributed hundreds of additional placenames, often with comments on their totemic significance; but it is equally clear that they omitted many more names to allow the narrative to flow. Numerous examples of the finely detailed understandings of the landscape exist; one abbreviated representative illustration, which gives both the placenames and several other sites by description only, now follows.

At Thungalula – the kangaroo made a large *Nurtunja* [ceremonial pole] and carried it away to Ilpartunga –, a small sand-hill arising where the animal lay down, and a mulga tree where the man camped. Travelling south –, they came to Alligera, where the kangaroo planted his *Nurtunja*, a large gum tree now marking the spot. Hearing a noise, he raised himself up on his hind legs –. A [tall] stone – now represents him standing on his hind legs. After this he scratched out a hole for the purpose of getting water, and this hole has remained to the present day. Travelling south, he came to – [another site], and here erected the *Nurtunja* for the last time, as he was too tired to carry it any further, so it was left standing and became changed into a fine gum tree, which is now called *Apera Nurtunja*, or the *Nurtunja* tree. (Spencer and Gillen 1968: 198).

It was this kind of detail, repeated in numerous variations for the travelling routes of the many creator ancestors, which caused Mounted Constable Cowle to make comment to Sir Baldwin Spencer. His note, written on 28 May 1900 independently of the Charles Chewings observation in the same year used at the commencement of these notes, complements the Chewings statement.

I believe that every water hole, Spring, Plain, Hill, Big Tree, Big Rock, Gutters and every peculiar or striking feature in the Country, not even

leaving out Sandhills, *without any exception whatsoever* is connected with some tradition and that, if one had the right blacks at that place, they could account for its presence there. (Mulvaney et al. 2000: 140)

All that was substantially, though not entirely, lacking now was a translation of the majority of the placenames. This was to come in the next 60 years, notably through the works of Rev. Carl Strehlow of Hermannsburg Mission, Geza Roheim and T. G. H. Strehlow. Their contribution could be the subject of another study; my intention, however, has been to consider historical aspects of Centralian placenames only up to the year 1901.

Were tracts without placenames a normal state of affairs?

The emphasis on any study of placenames takes away the consideration of areas without recorded placenames. While it is common to assume that in the last 50,000 years all of Australia was at some stage investigated and lived on by Aboriginal peoples, and in general terms I subscribe to this view, there are sizable 'blank spots'. While it is possible that these 'blank spots' exist because no early recorders discussed placenames with the Aboriginal people who traditionally lived in these areas, in central Australia I think the issue is at least worth considering.

It seems clear that certain inaccessible places had no placenames other than the general defining one. For instance, although large salt-lakes had at least one name, and a named mythological being or beings associated with them, and any islands, prominent features about their edges, and claypans or other waters in their near vicinity also had names (personal records of Pintupi placenames for and about Lakes MacDonald and Mackay on the Northern Territory–Western Australia border), they had either no or very few sites over the broad expanse of their surface. Lake Mackay is unusual in that, when it dried out in past decades, there was a direct south-west to north travelling route across a section of it, which necessitated a family group carrying water and wood for a fire at one night camp before they reached the further shore. However, as I understand, there were not specific named campsites on the Lake along this route. Similarly, there are considerable areas of range country, which, while having numerous named features when viewed from the valleys, plains or accessible high points, also have large sections which are unnamed. They may be accessible enough for the occasional hunting of euros and wallabies, or the collecting of native tobacco, but there are also sections which are too dangerous to climb to or about. That they were created by some mythological ancestor is normally recognised, but whatever waterholes, rock-shelters, crevices or other natural features occur

in such inaccessible places cannot ever have been directly named. Thus while saddles, high points, high caves and other distinctive features may be perceived as the travelling route, home or resting place of some mythological ancestors, and have a placename, the majority of a range may be described more in the nature of being, as a Pitjantjatjarra man told me, 'Pulli-pulli', literally 'stony hills-stony hills'. (These difficult-of-access and inaccessible areas act as refuges for flora and fauna, along with the deliberately managed and protected key fall-back waters and special sacred sites. In the case of the large salt-lakes, after great rains they contain water and food of a quantity and quality sufficient to allow migrating water birds to breed in large numbers, the majority of the birds being naturally protected from human predation by the water and deep mud barriers.)

Numbers of the early explorers' journals also state that there were a considerable number of other areas which were not visited, and therefore must not have contained named sites. Some of Giles' and Warburton's accounts outside of central Australia are quite compelling in a general sense, even if they are also to some extent disputed: but a number of areas within central Australia were also postulated as uninhabited. For instance, in the south-eastern Simpson Desert, the Aboriginal guide 'Moses' as mentioned previously, left Winnecke's 1883 expedition because he perceived that Winnecke was going to push north into an area he had warned Winnecke about. As Winnecke recorded on 17 and 21 August 1883:

Moses – seems to dislike the country to the northward, and tried to persuade me to leave it alone; he declared it to be all salt lakes and sandridges. I believe he was afraid to venture into the country to the north. (Winnecke 1884: 2-3)

It may be argued that 'Moses' knew and was afraid of the country precisely because he was correctly able to indicate its general nature. However, this may have been a handed-down oral history derived from generations of fruitless probes into the region; and knowledge that the traditional way to travel was to walk east to known waters and loop about the salt-lake and sandridge waste before coming back to wells in the vicinity of Poeppel's Corner. Thus there must have been the potential for it to have been an area that, even if occasionally visited after extraordinary soaking rains, was substantially avoided because it actually did not have any long-lasting drinkable waters, and was therefore too difficult and unproductive to exploit. Certainly Winnecke, who travelled about the edges of the Simpson Desert more than any other early European explorer, and who had already learnt over several years to follow the direction of Aboriginal smokes and the flight of birds to water, recognise Aboriginal burnt patches and track people, and estimate from high points the fall of land and likely places for water, found it as 'Moses' had indicated it would be. He was to travel for four days over salt-lake and sandridge country before travelling

almost six more days over purely sandridge country: the total distance was 205 miles (approximately 300 kilometres) between located waters. A few selected quotations are illustrative, the first from the area approaching Poeppel's Corner from the south-east.

22-8-1883. The sandhills or ridges passed over to-day are similar to those previously described; a few small flats in between them produce a little old and withered grass, cottonbush, saltbush, and bluebush. We also saw a few low wattle bushes to-day. The salt lakes seem to increase in number, and apparently extend some distance to the north. (Winnecke 1883: 3)

Similar descriptions follow, except that "gidgea [gidgee] timber" increases in the swales, and spinifex makes a first appearance. On 24 August he records: "A very extensive view is obtained from this [very prominent] sandridge; barren sandridges are visible and extend to the distant horizon in all directions" (Winnecke 1883: 4).

While it is known from the Wells and Lindsay accounts that there were a few native wells in the *near* vicinity of Poeppel's Corner, Wells also found from his Aboriginal guide that he was obliged to travel further east and north to locate any waters at all, while Lindsay's route was effectively east-west returning via a known line of native wells. However, Winnecke proceeded on his north-north-west way over red sandridges (noting the change in colour from white to red), using occasional very high sandhill points to scan the country ahead. There is no indication that he saw any animals throughout this region. Eventually, with the camels very fatigued and still no sign of water, he veered north-north-east, and on the 27th passed "over jumbled spinifex sandhills and sandy valleys". While the vegetation increased, there were still no signs of Aborigines or water. Winnecke concluded on 29 September, the day before he reached a waterhole on the Mulligan River:

The sandridges passed over during the last few days are similar to those previously described. This country is a perfect desert – I am almost certain that this country has never been visited by natives. (Winnecke 1883)

One can debate this statement, yet it was made by an observant explorer and appears to have been confirmed by the only others to visit the area prior to the last migrations out of the southern Simpson Desert in the period to 1899-1901 (e.g. see Hercus 1985; Hercus and Clarke 1986).

Without referring specifically to the journals, I believe that Davidson's similar 1901 perception of sizable tracts of the Tanami where very old spinifex existed are indicative of a largely avoided area; and that, as Hann and George

found in 1905-1906 and Finlayson in the 1930s, portions of the country between Bloods Range and Warman Rocks in the south-western part of the Centre were also of similar harsh nature, and therefore generally avoided. However, John Ross's 1870-1871 comments of a similar nature with regard to parts of the north-eastern MacDonnell Ranges are less likely to be correct, though they are interesting as an early note about country that he perceived as not to have been of use to Aborigines.

My own experiences when travelling widely in the Tanami Desert with Warlpiri, Mayatjarra and Kukatja (Luritja) people, and in the Gibson Desert–Great Sandy Desert interface with Pintupi people, is that there are numbers of small areas of about 200 square kilometres or so that are considered dangerous and/or 'rubbish' country because they have no water and very little food potential. Traditionally the walking routes went about such areas, or they were passed over quickly by a very direct route: they were similar to the totally unproductive route over the firm salt-surface of Lake Mackay, where the purpose was to reach a known site near the distant shore-line with water, shelter, firewood and food-potential as soon as possible. They have no placenames in themselves, but are affiliated on the periphery into the foraging zone of named sites. These named sites are as though fitted with a dimmer-light: when a severe drought occurs people are more-and-more constrained to the vicinity of the waterhole to conserve energy, whereas after good rains they expand out and away from the waterhole.

Another aspect which almost certainly requires further investigation is Chewings' view. He fully accepts that many localities, such as those which "may be helpful as land-marks, or as drinking places on their journeys", had placenames. However, he also commented:

[Objects] that serve no useful purpose to them will have no name. It has often been a puzzle to travellers to obtain the native name of some feature of interest. To the native that feature may have no interest, and for that reason may never have been named. (Chewings 1900: 3)

Clearly not every bit of rock, bush or tree could have a distinctive placename, any more than it could in any other society and country, so Chewings must be correct in a sense. However, counter to his view, is Mounted Constable Cowle's 1900 perception that

every peculiar or striking feature in the Country –, without any exception whatsoever is connected with some tradition and –, if one had the right blacks at that place, they could account for its presence there. (Mulvaney et al. 2000: 140)

It seems to me that both points of view are correct. In the latter instance “every peculiar or striking feature” from an Aboriginal point of view need not be similarly perceived as “peculiar or striking” by Europeans (though a site such as Chambers Pillar is). Much of central Australia is not particularly “peculiar or striking” from either an Aboriginal or European perspective, even if viewed and accounted for very differently. Although there are invariably more Aboriginal placenames than European ones in a given area, considerable tracts of sand-plain, generally similar sandhills, extensive iron-stone gravel areas, and so on, do not have other than general descriptive terms applied, such as *rira* for the gently rolling gravelly country of the Gibson Desert–Great Sandy Desert interface, or ‘too much tali’ (‘too many sandhills’) for areas of country in between known and named waters. Similarly, as indicated above, the various rock-faces, and piles of boulders, of a range of hills rarely have individual names in themselves: they are viewed as part of a broader ‘Dreaming’ ancestor-created feature with a general placename which incorporates a few more distinctive placename sites. The well-known Tjoritja (modern spelling Tyuretye) Hills between the Old Alice Springs Telegraph Station and the original town square of Alice Springs are a case in point. Some features within and about the Hills do have placenames, but most are perceived as part of a complex generally known as Tjoritja. The same applies to many other ranges and hills in the vicinity of Alice Springs, where there are probably more placename sites on record than in any other part of central Australia (see Wilkins (2002: 24-41) for an insightful discussion of placenames in and about Alice Springs).

Elsewhere in central Australia the geological features which are less distinctive in general nature have fewer, sometimes far fewer, names for an extensive area. Thus the Cleland Hills has seven named features (one a generally applied name, ‘Nose’ to a high point, which is otherwise called by its European name, Mount Winter, or sometimes incorporated in with the name of the nearest large rock-shelter site) and two which appear to have been forgotten. The Highland Rocks – a low and mostly gravelly line of hills with occasional areas of more prominent rocky tracts – have two key named sites (Nyanalpi and Yarritjarra), with two more which appear to have been forgotten. In the case of the latter two, they were referred to as ‘Pakuru-gulong’, meaning that they were part of the major Pakuru Bandicoot ‘Dreaming’ of the entire line of the hills, by the last deeply knowledgeable man who had been born at the key western site Yarritjarra (named Wickham’s Well by the 1930s explorer-pro prospector Michael Terry). He had known the two other names in his youth but could no longer recall them.

In brief summary, the richer in water-supplies and useful products a natural ‘block’ of country, such as a range of hills, is, the greater the likelihood of a dense number of placenames existing. Conversely, the more arid, featureless and also otherwise inaccessible the country, the less likely are placenames to be found.

Learning site names, and difficulties in revisiting sites

I travelled in 1971 with an extended family group between Papunya and Yuendumu in a somewhat overloaded Holden sedan. There were 14 of us inside it, and when the hunter of the group shot a full-grown emu and said, "All the same 15", I had to agree. East of Central Mount Wedge, at the highest point of the road, we paused on the rocky ridge-top, and Henry Tjugadai Tjungurrayi, the senior man and proud grandfather, lifted up his baby grandchild (about six months old), held her so that she was facing south and said, "Papunya, Papunya!" then, turning her so that she faced north, exclaimed, "Yuendumu, Yuendumu!" Everyone laughed with delight at this grandfatherly care and enjoyment of the baby and its happy nature. However, it also illustrates an important point about direction, which is that one keeps it by occasionally glancing behind at discernible known high-point features (mounts in the range immediately south of Papunya), as well as keeping in line by known high points ahead that indicate the whereabouts of the destination.

While it is mostly the women who carry the children to toddler age, and who strongly and obviously influence their learning about all kinds of matters, importantly including social relationships and kinship terms by the age of three, the men also have a role. Both men and women carry the small children in a variety of ways once they are no longer being carried by the women in a coolamon (wooden baby-carrier) and totally dependent on breast-feeding. Depending on age, size, health, alertness or need for sleep they may be held on either hip, conventionally 'piggy-backed', and straddle one or other shoulder or both. Less often the adult places both hands behind his or her back to act as a 'step' on which a child stands; or the adult, with both arms holding the child in, carries the weary or sleeping child horizontally across the small of the back. I believe that this variety of ways of carrying assists Aboriginal children to have a wider range of perceptions of the natural world. It assists in peripheral vision, and teaches people to constantly study and fine-tune to horizons as well as to what is closer at hand. Much of this early learning is to do with studying the natural environment, learning the values of different plants and the tracks and habits of the different insects and larger animals, and learning about the waters and other benefits such as shade, wood-supplies and soft sand at campsites.

When a particular site with an elevation is visited, the learning is specific, but not forced. Thus when visiting a Pintupi country rock-hole on the side of a small rocky outcrop that is part of the Ehrenberg complex, the late Turkey Toison Tjupurrula's son, who was about eight years old, not only learnt the location, nature and name of the rock-hole water for the first time, but Turkey also encouraged his son to come to where he was sitting. Holding him gently, he

pointed out the distant Kintore Range as a home-country site. While he was still explaining the details some zebra finches flew to the near tree, intent on drinking at the rock-hole, at which Turkey's son broke away from the instruction, picked up a stone and threw it at the zebra finches. Since this is what boys do, Turkey did not try to instruct him more in learning about the country.

When adults are being instructed, the same general process applies. Refinements increase, for many sites in sandhill country do not have distinctive high mounts or other features beside them to act as guides. There are innumerable variations in how sites are located, though a majority rely on some known distant feature that can be studied from a high point, and act as a starting-point directional guide to a site in between. If in sandhill country, the east-west trend of the sand dunes in western central Australia is itself a major directional pointer. For instance, when travelling from a small Perentie Dreaming Hill to the near south-west of the Ehrenberg Range to the westernmost Honey-Ant site of Atillili, the late Big Peter Tjupurrula and other senior Kukatja and Pintupi men stood with me on the crest of the Perentie Hill. Big Peter emphasised two points that the senior man of the group, Old Bert (Nyananya, Old Parta or Partaliri) Tjakamarra, had told him: that I must keep a saddle in a far hill to the east as my directional objective, and that shortly before we reached the hill we would sight a large bean-tree, which stood on the edge of Atillili Rock-hole. He reiterated these details about the saddle and the bean-tree, encouraging me to point to the saddle and repeat the two points, then we set off. A sandhill acted as a good general guide. However, when we reached the vicinity of the rockhole, neither the bean-tree nor the rock-hole could be seen. The senior man of responsibility for the site, Old Bert Tjakamarra, was most upset, while the other men felt sorry for him. Old Bert got out of the Toyota, and I accompanied him on what seemed like a lost cause while the other men waited.

We walked along the edge of the sandhill, which was quite low, until Old Bert saw some small dark rocks. He decided to climb to the crest of the sandhill at this stage, as the direction of the now nearby saddle in the hill indicated that we should look to the near south, but we still could not see the tall bean-tree. Old Bert was now very upset, but I suggested that we must be close because he had known where it was in his youth. We walked down the slope of the sandhill towards light mulga, and suddenly Bert sighted another clue. Here there was a line of 'natural' rounded black boulders streaked with white, most of them not much bigger than large loaves of bread. These were the Honey Ant ancestors! The young men! He was now excited, but also puzzled why he could not see the bean-tree. While animatedly talking, and while both looking for the tall bean-tree, we disturbed a wedge-tailed eagle. It flapped slowly up from a grove of light mulga, and Old Bert again became excited. We hurried towards where the eagle had first come into view, and there was the rockhole. The great towering

bean-tree of his youth, last seen perhaps 50 years earlier, was now an ancient fallen tree, with only a tall stump, still sprouting, as a reminder of its former grandeur. Old Bert began singing the Honey-Ant song with all his passion and might as I raced back up the sandhill and drove the vehicle to the vicinity of the rock-hole. Here all of the other Kukatja and Pintupi men joined Old Bert in song.

Atilili Rockhole was in flat granite, impossible to see unless within about 20 metres, and perhaps only two metres in diameter. After they had finished their singing the men joined Old Bert in excited discussion and, since it was a hot day, some lay prone (as is customary) to drink at the water. After he had drunk, Tjunkata Nosepeg Tjupurrula knelt to take a mouthful, held it in his mouth as he tilted his head back, and sprayed the water into the air so that it fell as a cooling shower all over him. All of the men had learnt to do so in their childhood when there was more than was needed for drinking in the hot weather.

And now it was time to move on to the key site, Tatata, guided by ridges in the southern slopes of the Ehrenberg Range; glittering quartz which marked where the Honey-Ant leader had been pleasurably dragged back to his Tatata home by the younger Honey-Ant men after his visit to Atilili, where the bending 'arm' branch of a large mulga tree, now dead when it had been thriving in his youth, pointed directly to the Tatata Rockhole.

An important point about such travel is that, while a direct as possible line may be kept for practical purposes, it is also important at special times to follow the route prescribed by ancestral creator beings, and it is conventional to follow routes additionally prescribed by customary uses of the land, and knowledge of both ease and difficulty of bare-footed walking across the land. This point was observed by considerable numbers of early explorers and other travellers, who rarely understood the reasons for a tortuous or serpentine route rather than a direct route as they could manage by compass.

This kind of difference between Aboriginal people and other Australians was succinctly summed up by the late Tjunkata Tjupurrula who, as with many central Australian Aborigines in the 1970s, was bemused by the fact that Europeans 'made work' when there was no apparent reason to work – and, conversely, paid 'sit-down money' (unemployment benefits) to those who did not work: "White-fellows make work. When they come to a big mountain they make a tunnel. Blackfellows just walk around."

From my experiences in the period 1970-1993 I have learned that the difficulties in finding sites increase markedly when no-one at all has visited a site which is only known by repute; people were under about five years of age when they last visited a site 30 or more years previously; the route is transverse to the trend of the sand-dunes, and no near high points are available as direction

pointers; rains have caused major tree growth that obscures the visibility in traditionally open country; or, conversely, bushfires have destroyed much of the vegetation, including individual 'sign-post' trees or clumps of trees. However, in the latter instance most of such trees appear to be naturally protected by being on largely bare sandhill sections or on rocky ground with little grass to carry a fire.

While these kinds of problems must have occurred less often in the pre-European past, it is nonetheless reasonable to assume that on occasions they were difficulties. Clearly, though, the more often a site was visited by numbers of people in pre-contact times, the more often the fine details of approaches to it and the site itself were likely to be remembered.

Could placenames be lost to, or forgotten by, traditional owners prior to European contact times?

Remembering fine details, and forgetting at least some of them, are part of the human condition for all societies. Aboriginal knowledge of placenames was most refined, and there were means of keeping the placenames constantly alive (e.g. by regularly visiting sites, by the singing of song-verses associated with a mythological trail in correct order; by the consideration of sacred objects in correct order; or by the repetitive telling of stories by rapid sketching on the sand). Nevertheless, the populations with generally good knowledge – let alone the highly refined knowledge of the oldest alert-minded senior women and men – were quite small. Charles Chewings' quotation, in its extended form, reads:

It has often been a puzzle to travellers to obtain the native name of some feature of interest. To the native that object may have no interest, and for that reason may never have been named; or, if so, the name being so rarely used, is only known to the old men, who are the geographers of the tribe. (Chewings 1900: 3)

That the 'right' or correct senior men of local association and knowledge were required is emphasised by Cowle (in Mulvaney et al. 2000: 140), and clearly in many instances the older women as well as older men either knew directly of such sites or generally understood where they were located.

At this point it is worth mentioning that, although general knowledge of sites, including of sites sacred to men on the one hand and women on the other, was known to both the oldest men and women, the men did not know the fine details of the women's world any more than the women knew the fine details of the men's world (e.g. see Strehlow 1978: 38-39). However, I believe, on the basis of privileged travel with men, women and children of various central desert

peoples, that a wider variety of sites and general areas were known to men than to women. The difference probably owes its origins to the need for men and women to hunt and gather in different localities: women took care of children more often than men, as was necessary when quiet was needed while men were hunting the at times relatively rare kangaroos, emus and other large game. In my experience it is certain that the majority by far of high and relatively difficult-of-access sacred named places are known directly to men only, while lower accessible sites are generally shared by all members of a community, or far less often divided into men's and women's sacred sites.

This altitude knowledge is not a universal 'rule', as women traditionally also climbed quite high to obtain red ochre at Karku in Warlpiri country; to the base of sheer scarp faces and to high rock-shelters in many range sections, mounts and hills throughout central Australia to obtain prized native tobacco; and in the George Gill Range and other sandstone ranges to the large rock-shelters high in the ranges for family and group shelter during wet weather, and to exploit the resources in their near vicinity. Nonetheless, as a general principle, from the mounts of the south-western Simpson Desert to those in the Tanami and Great Sandy Deserts, I believe that the high rocky country, mostly beyond the large easily accessible waters, was primarily the province of men.

Discussions in the 1970s with senior men who had spent their early manhood and middle age in pre-contact situations indicated that, at best, about 13 years occurred between visits to sites of particularly difficult access, while at times as long as 50 years might pass. The same must have been the situation with women's major sacred sites. Knowledge of even such major important sites as these has increasingly been substantially or totally lost during the century and more of contact with the wider society. This must also have been the case, if far less frequently, in pre-contact times during extended periods of aridity which made visits problematic; or because of serious fighting over an extended period. Major epidemics or droughts may have resulted in so many deaths that there was loss of corporate knowledge and consequent focus on a more limited suite of sites than prior to the disaster. There may also have been some catastrophe such as loss of a major access water because of a land-slide or earthquake.

In the case of major, and always named, fall-back rock-hole or native-well waters which are men-only sites, I have been independently told by Eastern Arrernte, Kukatja (Luritja), Warlpiri and Pintupi men that the men traditionally took water-bowls to the sites, filled them, and took them to nearby areas where middle-aged or older fit women carried them one to two kilometres back to the main camp. In such instances the senior women knew the name and general direction of the site, but not the details, which may be quite remarkable in 'natural' forms, paintings, engravings, sacred store-houses, stone arrangements and so on. As an alternative, at a Pitjantjatjarra men's site, the women were

permitted to walk in along the only easy-of-access walking pad to fill their bowls with water, but had to keep their eyes averted so that they did not see paintings in a low rock-shelter or a sacred 'natural' stone in the nearby small water-course (see Strehlow [1971: 341] for similar comments). There appear to be fewer equivalent women's sites; nevertheless, as the senior Aboriginal men must know their location to be able to avoid them, I have also had indicated to me by senior men the location of Warlpiri and Pintupi sites where women alone are permitted to go, or where women are the main users of such sites.

In contrast to this there are sites about which all members of a family, and often many more people, know, yet which are worth mentioning. This is particularly so in the case of places of conception in the central areas and birth in the western areas of central Australia. As Frank Gillen wrote on 14 June 1901:

Each man woman and child of this tribe [of the 'Kaitish' of the Barrow Creek area] is associated with some natural feature such as a tree or rock this feature marks the spot at which their Alcheringa ['Dreamtime'] ancestor died – Every person now living is the reincarnation of an Alcheringa individual. Generally the natural feature is a tree and it is carefully tended by the man or woman with whom it is associated and who speaks of it as his or her Ilpilla. Often a clear space is swept around its base and dry pieces of bark are picked off and thrown aside. (Gillen 1968: 119)

The following are my own complementary perceptions derived from travels and discussions with senior central Australian men and women over the last 32 years.

In such instances as Gillen described, the knowledge of the site tends to be lost in a century, yet because most conception-sites, and most births, were and often still are in the vicinity of a known water, the tendency for nearby old trees to be revered is very great. This also applies to old trees along a watercourse or other approach route leading to a named water; to large trees at the entrance to a gorge, or along the line of an outflow watercourse or about a claypan; and to distinctive individual trees, clumps of trees, and lines or circles of trees in almost any situation. Old coolibahs, redgums, ghost gums, mulgas, tea trees and fig trees are commonly regarded in this way, and elsewhere old corkwood, desert oak, bloodwood and other large old trees are similarly revered. In some instances, particularly in the vicinity of important waters, certain bushes and tussocks of grass are also perceived in the same way. Whether at some stage in the care of a living individual or not, they are invariably incorporated into the local mythology, which is eternally present.

An important point about this is that it is accepted that old trees die so that, in the case of those trees that are associated with mythological beings rather than a living person (though as above-indicated the two can be inextricably entwined), nearby younger trees are considered the potential replacements, being regarded as the young brothers or sisters, or daughters and sons, of the older trees. However, in the case of men's sacred sites, and at major fall-back waters sacred to all, only old men (in my experience) are normally considered able to nominate the particular replacement tree in any instance of the death of an important tree, the replacement tree being determined not just by proximity, but also by the peculiar individual form of it, which indicates a direct association with the local mythology. This same individuality is applied to stones on a hillside, or at the base of a hill, since – again in my experience – only old men are considered to have the wisdom to be able to determine their significance, to make choices for collection as sacred objects, or to use in adding to or making a stone arrangement complementary to others in existence at a site. Senior women, of course, are the key determinants at those sites specific to women only, but also are the key people when all local senior men are deceased, and where the mythology involves travels and deeds by mythological women.

Few of such trees, or other features such as boulders, are given individual placenames, although some do exist. They are instead more likely to be part of the mythological detail of a locality – the birds which tried to dam the water, the travelling initiates, the dancing women, the travelling emus, the leader of the dingo pack and his followers, and so on.

When, as some of Strehlow's informants stated and demonstrated, they alone as individuals in pre-European times of instruction had learnt song-verses and ceremonies (Strehlow n.d.; implicit in Strehlow 1971), then the chance of loss of knowledge of placenames associated with these same songs and ceremonies must have been very great indeed. Any single unexpected death would have resulted in a treasure-trove of individual knowledge being lost, and any catastrophic event would surely have resulted in very considerable loss of a major group's collective knowledge, including that of placenames. (See Campbell 2002 for a discussion of the impact of smallpox epidemics and other diseases. Although accepting that these disease catastrophes were linked to Macassan, then to European, contact in the last 220 years, the same situation must have prevailed in pre-contact times, if to a lesser extent, because of endemic diseases or drought.)

As final comments on the loss of knowledge, Frank Gillen is quoted from his diary of June 1901:

The old men are perfect store houses of knowledge and unless the younger men show a special and reverent interest in such matters the old fellows remain dumb as oysters. (Gillen 1968: 123)

He also believed that in some instances the singers of songs did not know the meanings of the words (Gillen 1968: 116-117), and noted that “unfortunately the old men have recently died without imparting any of the important traditions connected with the totem and these traditions are lost forever” (Gillen 1968: 123). Such losses of understanding of meaning, and loss of traditions, must also have meant loss of knowledge of sites of association.

In summary, I believe that while the retention of finely detailed knowledge was normal, so too was the occasional loss of knowledge of the names and whereabouts of sites. Key sites of significance such as drought-refuge waters, or major sacred sites, were unlikely to ever be forgotten so long as numbers of people resided in an area, though the emphasis on their mythological significance at times changed.

Discovering, rediscovering and naming sites

Although the landscape was eternal in central Australian Aboriginal beliefs, we must accept that new names were bestowed on sites in the past, including – as indicated above – that conception and birth-sites could be named by living individuals by taking into account the pre-existing knowledge of the landscape.

Long-term climate understandings, as well as archaeological and ecological knowledge, clearly indicate that regions, or large parts of regions, were abandoned for centuries, if not for thousands of years. People who later rediscovered a landscape would therefore have come upon evidence indicating that past ancestral groups had occupied it. In such instances the evidence at the time of rediscovery as well as that left centuries before, may well have suggested a meaning for a site. For instance, if emus were seen to be regularly visiting a waterhole, and clear but ancient engravings of emu tracks were prominent near the water, then one can envisage that the site might well be re-named as an Emu Dreaming site. Whether this was in fact the original meaning or not could never be known, but the new naming would certainly have a good chance of being related to an earlier one. The same would apply to many other sites.

One can also accept that there was every chance that, with a population rebuilding after a catastrophe and with good seasons to allow the widest possible travel, any sites lost might well be rediscovered, and their names recalled, perhaps through knowledge of an intact song cycle. The same would almost certainly apply if one group permanently took over for safe-keeping the neighbouring territory of a group which became extinct for some reason or other (e.g. an older generation dying, with no young males born or surviving, and the women marrying out of their country over two or three generations); or if a group invaded another’s country and, in the ensuing fighting, the majority

of adult males were killed. Regardless of how much knowledge remained and was able to be reactivated (e.g. see Spencer and Gillen 1927 vol. 1: 120-123 for the significance of sacred objects in association with country), in many such instances placenames, songs and ceremonies of association must have had to be totally reinvented. In any *total reinvention* a core of principles would have been applied, and though it seems improbable to me that the original forgotten name could have been reinstated, let alone the same mythological details, songs and ceremonies, this would not have mattered in the long term. The positive dynamics at work in Aboriginal society would have meant that the new information was readily accepted, because it would still have derived directly from the Dreaming, even if a particular person was acknowledged as the composer of the new name, song or ceremony.

Another possibility is that some entirely new travelling ceremony, highly prized by all who received it, may have resulted in additions to, or replacements of, pre-existing placenames by names derived from the new mythology and ceremonies. The site Kolba on the Hale River has some such possibility, in that the Wedge-tailed Eagle song of association was known to only one man in Strehlow's time, its significance apparently having almost totally been lost because of the predominant significance of the travelling Quoll ancestors (sighted diary reference). Sites where a wide range of engraved and, probably to a lesser extent, painted motifs are to be found also suggest changing focus over centuries, if not thousands, of years, and here one can envisage either the name changing, its meaning and mythological association changing, or both the name and the mythology changing. As the late N. Tjupurrula said of Alalya, to the far south-west of Alice Springs, "too many Dreamings, Tjakamarra". Certain of the Dreamings were still known – Emu, Sunrise, Dingo and Snake included – and certain of the "peculiar or striking" features, as well as paintings and engravings of association, were also known, but much knowledge had also been lost in the preceding century (and, in the case of the engravings, centuries).

An alternative to this, of which I am aware occurred at a small site in Warlpiri country, is that it became associated with the larger nearby site, which is approximately two kilometres distant. Although all of the senior men knew of the existence of the small site, the one senior man who had certainly learnt its name in his youth had forgotten its name. No-one present seemed concerned by this, because the nearby large site was the rock-hole which was the key to food exploitation of the area, and associated with it were paintings, engravings, stored sacred objects and stone arrangements. Thus the former small site which had lost its name became as though a small suburb of the larger.

The case of previously unknown sites in well-known territory, which have been discussed by senior Warlpiri, Luritja and Pintupi men with me over the last 33 years, also gives an idea of what traditionally transpired. These sites

were revealed by a flood, during drilling for oil and through drilling for water (a windmill was erected at the latter site). The form of each new site was discussed in whispered fear and excitement by the senior men, a 'Dreaming' association made as a result of over-all knowledge of the 'Dreamings' of the near country and close study of the form and colour of each revelation, and each was incorporated into the pre-existing mythological trail to a nearby site. Of these only the Warlpiri site, being in between two tolerably distant sites on the same trail, has been given a separate name, linking the name of the ancestral being with water. In yet another instance a small, newly European-made hollow in Pintupi country, the result of grader work to make a track, was perceived as the home of a mythological water-snake ancestor because of 'naturally' occurring marks left on the surface by rainwater.

None of these sites has yet had songs or ceremonies of association developed for them, and it seems unlikely to me that this will occur, given general inaccessibility and, for complex reasons, loss of much of the traditional knowledge by the younger generations.

However, in an instance where a far west Western Warlpiri site, unknown to the Pintupi men with whom I was travelling (we had inadvertently travelled north of a known walking route), was discovered, the men considered what site it must be by the following means. First, because it was almost totally obscured by a sandhill, it was understandable that they did not know of its whereabouts, yet its crest allowed them a perspective on distant rocky hills to the south and west well-known to them because they included the birthplace of one of the men and were otherwise on a traditional west-east walking route. Much animated talk followed, identifying these sites and discussing the 'Dreaming' associations. From this discussion and the singing of a 'travelling' song of association with one particular distant site, a site name was determined. The Pintupi men knew, from the nature of the song, from previous associations with Western Warlpiri, and from their general understandings of the landscape, that there must be a good water supply here. While the younger men of the group believed that, by the 'sign' of a millstone and a worn area of rock, they had located the small adjoining rockhole that gave the site its significance (though upon scooping out the sand it was found to be dry), the senior man of the party was sure that another long-lasting water must be available. This man, Arthur Patuta Tjapananga, commenced an examination of the northern exposed area of rock surface while everyone else remained on the crest naming the distant sites and their traditional owners, discussing previous visits to them, and recalling past experiences at them.

At a call from Arthur we gathered where he sat. He pointed to some small green plants near a centimetres-long crevice too small for any person's hand then, using a straight, slender dry stick from a nearby bush, poked it into the

crevice and moved it so that we could hear the sound of splashing water. We all laughed and smiled with delight at the discovery of the permanent water. Arthur explained that, traditionally, it was drawn from its reservoir inside the rock by binding soft tussock grass to the end of the stick, poking it into the crevice, then withdrawing it quickly and squeezing the grass 'sponge' into a *piti* (wooden water-carrying bowl).

Such examples as have been given need no further discussion. Clearly there is a core of information at work.²

Moving site names

A suggested potential for change

In that sacred objects were associated with specific sites, I speculate that their long-term movement (see Spencer and Gillen 1927: 120-123) must have had the potential to give weighting to the mythology they depicted and, in rare circumstances, to have altered the mythological weighting given to a 'temporary' storage site that became permanent. This in turn could possibly lead to a change of name. I have no clear evidence of this, but it would seem potentially likely if both sites were on the same mythological trail, and one which was formerly important became abandoned for some reason, e.g. an earthquake destroyed the water or, as in two instances in Warlpiri country, on the one hand destroyed a major 'natural' feature of significance, and on the other destroyed a ridge-top approach to a sacred cave, thereby rendering it inaccessible. In the case of abandonment of a site, the whereabouts of the locality and its site-name would almost certainly become lost to memory quite quickly unless it were a very prominent feature.

Forced and legitimising placename change

A direct change of a series of names was recorded by Norman Tindale in 1933, with follow-up discussion in 1957. As the broad record of movements of people that he records suggests probable loss of association with sites, and therefore loss of placenames, on the one hand, and changes in names on the other, the greater part of the reference is quoted. Tindale indicates that the severe drought of 1914-1915, and loss of native game animals, were the main reasons for these movements, which suggests the likelihood of similar changes having occurred in the past.

To the west [of the rain-favoured Musgrave Ranges] it was so dry that most of the Pijandjara tribespeople were forced to shift eastward and by 1916

had usurped the territory of the northern hordes of the Jangkundjara, permanently driving them away from the eastern Musgraves. There was a forced southward shift of the Jangkundjara people by from 140 to 160 miles (225 to 250 km). (Tindale 1974: 69)

Much more information on other movements is given before he continues:

The Pitjandjara men now claim the Ernabella end of the Musgrave Ranges as within their territory. One old man informed me in 1933 that, in relating the stories of his tribe to children, he and other older men had arranged stones near Ernabella and had transferred place names and locations of some myths to the new area, so that children could see them. This seemed to be a stage in the actual legitimization of their claims to the country. (Tindale 1974: 69)

This clearly indicates one traditional way of Aborigines making name-changes. However, in his continuation of the comments Tindale indicates that many placenames and the totemic mythology could be lost, but that some of the pre-existing placenames were simply adopted by the invaders.

In 1957 when discussing this matter with some western Pitjandjara men on Officer Creek, – I learned that there were no real totemic places in the eastern area that they were gradually acquiring because of the defection of Jangkundjara migrating to the railway town of Finke and nearby ranches (stations), and indeed they still had only a few names, mostly taken over by hearsay from the Jangkundjara. (Tindale 1974: 69)

The preceding notes indicate that quite a complex situation could prevail, with placenames being moved, sites and placenames presumably being lost and forgotten, and placenames being learnt from others, but having limited meaning.

Site change because of a ritual disaster

Strehlow gives details of a Wedge-tailed Eagle ceremony held “at Uralawuraka, east of Charlotte Waters, in the 1850’s or 1860’s”. During the course of it women and children were able to make use of the nearby water, but were at no stage permitted to witness the actual ceremonies – though they could glimpse the top of a tall ceremonial pole when it was illuminated in the distance by large fires. (In equivalent situations at which I have been privileged to be present, and which I suspect also prevailed during the Uralawuraka ceremonies, the women and children are not permitted to see the ceremonies or hear the songs, so that the Uralawuraka women’s and children’s camp must have been about 500 metres away at closest, and if a breeze was blowing that carried the sounds of the men’s singing, would have been moved further away.)

At one stage ‘an unfortunate accident’ occurred at the ceremonial ground which, being considered sacrilege by the senior men present, resulted in two or three young men being put to death, and everyone then fleeing from the area. Strehlow continues:

[None of the site specific eagle commemorative ceremonies] were ever held again either at Uralawuraka or at Akar Intjota. Men belonging to the eagle totem in this area had to be content with performing merely those eagle acts that belonged to them personally. Had no European settlers come into the Centre, it might have been possible for the local group leaders to revive the – [particular] festivals after a lapse of many decades. (Strehlow 1970: 112-113)

This tragic circumstance suggests a way that site names could be lost, although in this instance they were not. However, the late Walter Smith, a man of Arabana descent who had spent his youth at Arltunga (east of Alice Springs), told me a variation of this account. I estimate the events to have occurred c.1860 (that is, similar to the Strehlow estimate). Walter had heard the story in its general outline from old Simpson Desert men, born in the 1850s-1870s, such as Sandhill Bob from the Plenty River, Kolbarinya from the Hale River, and Lalai Lalai from the Poodiniterria Hills. However, he had also been told of the ceremony’s short-term revival. It was achieved as follows.

After some 50 or so years there were very good rains and the surviving youngest men who had been present, now very old, determined that the festival should be revived. They discussed the matter with other Eagle men who had rights south and north of Uralawuraka and Akar Intjota and, while the songs and many details of the ceremonies were well-recalled, two problems remained. One was where to hold the ceremonies and, because of residual fear of the site at which the executions had occurred, it was decided to move them to the next site north. The other problem was that none of the men of knowledge could clearly enough remember the body patterns needed for a key element of the cycle. This was resolved by the men calling upon a very old woman, who by that time was living in Oodnadatta. She initially claimed no knowledge at all, as it was clear that such details were restricted to men and, having been present at the women’s and children’s camp at the time, she knew that deaths had occurred and was fearful for her own life. However the senior men were able to assure her that they only wanted her help, and that she would not be punished in any way.

The ceremonies were revived in c.1910, as previously indicated at the next relatively minor site north, which had sufficient water to become the replacement location for Uralawuraka. This method of solving a problem indicates how a site-name and associated songs and ceremonies could be moved and how the prior site could lose its ritual significance.

Site name change because of death of a key person

Strehlow indicates that all Arrernte people had at least two names, one of them sacred and rarely used, and that those people from key sacred sites might well have as many as four formal names, in addition to other terms of reference (Strehlow 1971: 123, 384-385, 387-388). The same is the case with many, if not all, Warlpiri and Pintupi people with whom I have travelled. Similarly the mythological creator beings could have more than one formal name (Strehlow 1971: 550), and the key elements in a ceremonial song could have 'substitute' words, some of metaphorical nature (Strehlow 1971: 179). The variant names are often greatly different in nature, particularly when poetic imagery is used, so that ceremonial pole, box gum tree and Milky Way can all mean one and the same thing (Strehlow 1971: 179). This suggests that sites almost certainly had alternative names – to make an analogy, perhaps similar to the Adelaide suburb of Glenelg also being referred to as, or directly associated with, Holdfast Bay, 'the Bay', the Patawalonga River mouth, 'the Pat', and 'the Home of the Tigers' or 'Tigerland' (the latter two in reference to the local football team). There are even the alternative references, well enough known in the Adelaide area, such as 'we're going to visit the Proclamation Tree/the Old Gum Tree', which do not need reference to Glenelg for people to at least generally know of the location, as used also to be the situation with 'the Big Gum Tree' as a meeting place at the Adelaide suburb of Glen Osmond. Local area people normally know all of such references, whereas the further away people live the less likely they are to know more than one or two key references.

In that a person's name could derive directly from a site and mythological creator ancestor of that site, and a person's name was not allowed to be mentioned directly for a considerable time after death (two years is about the time in my experience), this suggests the possibility that a site from which a person derived his or her name must also have had to be referred to alternatively or obliquely after a person's death in at least some instances. Although a name-change would not be at all likely to be permanent in such an instance, the possibility remains that it might have been.

I can recall only one instance of this being specifically mentioned to me. This was while visiting a Pintupi site in Western Australia in the 1980s. The late Uta Uta Tjangala, senior man of knowledge and authority at the time, explained that the particular rockhole had once been known by another name – I believe in either his father's or grandfather's youth – but that, after a man of the same name had been speared to death there, the 'new' name had been applied. No-one at all any longer used, normally mentioned, or in many cases even knew, the old name. Thus I estimate that, in an oral history tradition, a deliberate change of placename would, in normal circumstances, result in loss of collective memory of the original placename in approximately a century.

I suspect that such placename changing was quite rare, in that any site along a 'Dreaming' trail, extensive walking trail or 'song line' tended to be 'fixed' in the way that a site on another country's pilgrimage or old trading route trail is. Although linguists are the only people likely to be able to shed light on such matters, it seems to me likely that some of the archaic references in songs refer, either directly or through metaphor, to older 'extinct' site names.

Site name additions as the result of memorable events or as revealed in dreams

Sites such as these can be either pre-existing geographical features, or Western-world created (such as a station building or bore). In the case of it being event-oriented, similar naming occurs to that in the broader society, sometimes in the local language, sometimes in a form of 'bush English' or sometimes in conventional English. Such names often drop out of use after one generation if only associated with a few people (e.g. Uta Uta Tjangala directed me to a place where he and his brother had camped during heavy rain, which was 'two tree camp'), but can become longer lasting. For instance, a site on the outskirts of Alice Springs has an Aboriginalised pronunciation of 'monkey' as part of it, and probably derives from where a monkey, brought to Alice Springs in the late 1880s or early 1890s, was riding a horse, fell off and was killed.

A revelation in a dream, particularly if translated into a song about a dream-revealed site, is likely to result in an addition to a known body of knowledge about a group's country, which may include the creation of a site-name in the local language. I do not have any good records of such placenames, but from occasional volunteered comments believe that it is not an unusual occurrence, particularly when noted 'doctor' people are involved. Such people, who may be men or women (though men appear to be more commonly recognised), are believed by others, and themselves believe, that they have greater ability than most people to both have and interpret dreams.

In conclusion, site-name changes are made for a variety of reasons, including the result of group movement and the need to assert ownership of sites previously owned by others; because a calamity has occurred which renders a site unusable for some time, so that a near site becomes the replacement focus of activities; because a person of the same name as the site has died and a replacement reference is needed given Indigenous mourning practices; and almost certainly as a result of the changing focus of mythology and ritual at a site over time. Loss of site-name knowledge through deaths of elders prior to them transmitting details, inaccessibility of a site as a result of such as an earthquake or flood, and loss of memory are counterbalanced by revelations about other sites. These might be trees which become significant because people are born beneath their

protecting canopy; outcrops uncovered by the same earthquake or flood which has destroyed or made inaccessible other sites; sites – whether part of the local geography or human-built – where contemporary dramatic events occur; or sites which are dreamed into existence.

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Endnotes

1. This site is about 45 kilometres west of Clifton Hill Station at the very furthest edge of the Warburton flood plain, in what was certainly Ngamani country. The two forms of the Aboriginal name are just variants representing Ngamani *Marda-marru-(nha)* 'Stone-flat' + optional proper noun marker *-nha* (Luise Hercus, pers. comm.).
2. I would argue that a very different cultural core, with some of the same key elements, was at work when the first Europeans entered central Australia. Since they were unable to speak the languages of the Aborigines, and vice versa, and as the majority of first-contact Aborigines avoided them or were simply absent from the traversed landscape, they had to make their own way. Their main concern was to find water and food, and in that they were guided by the lie of the land and observed weather and the behaviour of animals, they were similar to the initial Aboriginal explorers of Australia. However, they had the advantage of also being to observe evidence of Aboriginal occupation and, less often, were able to encourage Aborigines to show or guide them to water. Their placenames often included a general descriptive term which indicates the essentially significant nature – *Finke River*, *Chambers Pillar*, the *MacDonnell Ranges*, the *Burt Plain*, *Glen Hughes*, *Ormiston Gorge*, *Mount Giles*, *Alice Springs*, *Ayers Rock*, *Tarn of Auber* – while at the same time honouring their European supporters, families and placenames.