
Introduction: Old and new aspects of Indigenous place-naming

HAROLD KOCH AND LUISE HERCUS

This book is a sequel to Hercus, Hodges and Simpson (eds) 2002, *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Indigenous Origin in Australia* (Pandanus Books and Pacific Linguistics, Canberra). As with the earlier volume, many of the papers originated as papers presented to workshops on placenames that were organised at the instigation of the Australian Placename Survey project at Macquarie University and/or the meetings of Geographical Names Boards. Both volumes involve interdisciplinary perspectives on Australian placenames of Indigenous origin.

The “naming and re-naming” in the subtitle highlights the fact that both old/traditional and new/contemporary aspects of place-naming are reflected in these studies. Four general themes can be discerned: (1) the contrast between the traditional systems of toponymy of Indigenous societies and the Anglo-Australian nomenclature that has been overlaid on the Australian landscape; (2) attempts, in several Australian jurisdictions, to discover and/or re-instate Indigenous names for geographic features, including newly formed entities such as national parks; (3) interpretations and evaluations of older documentary sources on Indigenous placenames in the light of modern methods and insights; (4) the continuing role of placenames in the memory of Indigenous social groups.

The papers are organised on a roughly geographical basis, beginning with Sydney and continuing in a clockwise circle around the continent. The first section includes five papers on New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The first paper, by Val Attenbrow, discusses Aboriginal placenames for some 90 locations around Port Jackson and Botany Bay that were recorded by officers of the First Fleet and early surveyors – whether or not they were adopted into the English nomenclature system (such as Parramatta, Woolloomooloo, Bondi, etc.). The paper discusses each of the written sources (including what is known about the Aboriginal people who supplied the information), issues of local identification of particular sites, spellings, etc. The paper includes maps and

complete lists of placenames. The following paper by Jakelin Troy and Michael Walsh discusses issues in the reinstating of some of these same placenames. As an exercise in applied philology, it describes the practical problems of deciding on the phonetic content of the names that are attested in a range of different spellings, and discusses issues in deciding on a workable spelling to institutionalise as the placenames are adopted into official nomenclature, as is made possible in the recent policy of the Geographical Names Board of New South Wales. This policy is put in perspective by Greg Windsor's paper, which describes the policy, its background, and planned future initiatives.

Jim Smith's paper provides considerable detail on the toponymy of a small area, not far from Sydney in the Blue Mountains territory of the Gundungurra, using the valuable documentation provided by the recently discovered papers of grazier Alfred Leonard Bennett, which contain plentiful information supplied by Werriberrie, also known as Billy Russell, a knowledgeable Gundungurra elder (c. 1835-1914). This information gives us a glimpse into the rich mythology that lies behind Aboriginal toponymy. It also provides a healthy corrective to popular modern explanations given for famous sites such as Katoomba.

What follows, in Harold Koch's contribution, is an exposition of the methodology of reconstructing the pronunciation and meaning of Aboriginal placenames that derive from languages no longer spoken and imperfectly recorded. Several senses of the 'meaning' of placenames are disentangled (location of the site, etymology or literal meaning, etiology or story behind the name). The reconstruction methods that are needed come from the disciplines of history and linguistics. The latter supplies techniques to explain and deal with vagaries in the transmission of pronunciation across the linguistic gulf that divided European recorders from Aboriginal speakers. If these techniques are successfully applied, it should be possible to account for most of the spelling variants that are found. Examples are supplied from the region around Canberra and, more widely, south-eastern New South Wales—including a discussion of the name 'Canberra' itself.

Three papers deal with Victoria. Laura Kostanski studies a collection of popular twentieth century books on Aboriginal placenames. She analyses the ideology behind the use of Aboriginal placenames by Anglo-Australians and their role in forging a national identity in post-federation times. She demonstrates that there was little concern with the authenticity of these expropriated names in their Aboriginal context. Laura Kostanski and Ian Clark further discuss colonial uses of Indigenous placenames – the imposition of the colonisers' understanding of geography on top of a land populated with prior Indigenous names. They use the term "Anglo-Indigenous" for placenames of Indigenous origin that were used for colonial cartographic purposes. They introduce the metaphor of the landscape as a palimpsest, i.e. a parchment from which the original writing

has been partially erased to make room for another text. They then proceed to discuss the recent Victorian policy of favouring the bestowal of traditional Indigenous names on unnamed topographical features and even features already named (as an extra name). In particular they discuss modern attempts (from 1989) to name sites within the Grampians National Park – expounding on the approach to finding names, conflicts that have arisen, and proposals to evaluate the pedigrees of proposed Indigenous names. Ian Clark’s paper is concerned to show that when documenting Aboriginal placenames in regions such as western Victoria, where Aboriginal languages no longer prevail, it is still possible to reconstruct something of the microtoponymy that characterises Aboriginal languages, thanks to fairly detailed recording of placenames by early observers such as G. A. Robinson, Dawson, and Stone.

The third section includes five papers dealing with South Australia and Central Australia. Paul Monaghan shows how Norman Tindale was a pioneer of the detailed study of placenames. He examines a section of Tindale’s large manuscript data for the southern part of South Australia. He describes Tindale’s sources and critically assesses his methods. John McEntee presents a study of Lake Callabonna, formerly called Lake Mulligan. Relying on information derived from Adnyamathanha people, he argues that the name Mulligan is of Aboriginal (rather than Irish) origin, and supplies the likely meaning and its justification. Luise Hercus’ first contribution tells us what can be known about the traditional Arabana placenames in an area to the west and north-west of Lake Eyre – whether they have been retained on European maps, were superseded by European names, or remain unnamed on modern maps. She provides both the literal meaning of the placenames and the mythological stories behind the names. Worthy of particular mention is the number of places that come from myths about noxious insects – ants, lice, mosquitoes and march flies. Hercus’ second paper deals not with particular sites but with the nomenclature of larger areas in the far north-east of South Australia. She shows that Aboriginal people traditionally labelled tracts of country, not only according to the tribal groups that occupy them (‘Wangkungurru country’), but also from the point of view of natural features or landforms (‘high sandhill country’) as well as mythology (‘territory of the Two Boys’). Richard Kimber closely analyses some early records concerning places in Central Australia, then proceeds to give us his reflections on several issues of traditional knowledge and naming of places based on his own decades-long interaction with Aboriginal people from desert areas.

The final section contains six papers on northern areas of Australia. Some of these deal largely with linguistic aspects of placenames. Others focus on the social significance of placenames to the Aboriginal communities.

Claire Bovern gives details of the naming system used among the Bardi people of the north-west point of the Dampier Peninsula in northern Western Australia.

At the highest level of hierarchical organisation are “area names”; within each area there are a number of booroo (‘camps’) associated with particular “families”; each booroo in turn contains multiple specifically named localities within it. She further discusses the etymological sources of placenames – whether they derive from common nouns, are borrowed from foreign languages, are said to have been bestowed by culture heroes, or are otherwise associated with mythological events – and shows how placenames are used in verbal interaction and how they function in the grammar of the language.

Mark Clendon describes the names of ‘countries’, or clan estates, in the territory of the Worora-speaking people of Western Australia’s north-west Kimberley region, where clan names are derived from the names of these countries. He describes the persistent and immutable nature of placenames that survive even when their associated lineages die out. This is possible because of permanent links between the land and its mythology, which are illustrated by the analysis of an important North Kimberley myth which provides a mandate for traditionally-observed legal processes of succession to vacant country.

Patrick McConvell examines the use the locative (‘at’) case form in the citation and neutral form of placenames of languages of Victoria River District of the Northern Territory. A common feature of languages in this area is the use of expressions that literally mean ‘exactly at (placename)’. Given the fact that this naming pattern is shared between languages regardless of whether they belong to the Pama-Nyungan family of languages, the question arises as to whether the distribution of the pattern across languages is the result of the historic adoption by speakers of one group of languages of the pattern used by those of another linguistic group. This paper is an exercise in the exploration of linguistic and cultural prehistory using the evidence of placenames.

The paper by Melanie Wilkinson, (the late) Dr R. Marika and Nancy M. Williams follows the history of the interaction between traditional Yolngu and European understandings of place with respect to a small geographic area on the Gove Peninsula in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. It describes the traditional cosmogony-based naming system of the Yolngu people, names bestowed by Macassan and European (Dutch and English) explorers, and naming associated with the establishment of a mining industry since the 1960s (including the name ‘Gove’). The paper concentrates on the documentation of disputes over names such as Gove and Nhulunbuy, but also names within the new township. This paper places in sharp relief the differences between traditional Indigenous and introduced Anglo-Australian naming practices and philosophies. Also included is a fairly comprehensive description of linguistic characteristics of placenames in Yolngu languages and how these differ from English placenames. In this paper

too we are reminded that it was a dispute over precisely this piece of land that contributed, via the famous bark petition, to the establishment of Land Rights legislation in the Northern Territory.

John Bradley and Amanda Kearney explore what they call the ‘emotional geography’ of an economically and mythologically important place called Manankurra. This ‘big place’ continues to occupy a central place in the minds and discourse of Yanyuwa people who now reside 60 kilometres away at Borroloola, Northern Territory. This site is important as the source of the cycad palm, which was deposited there by their tiger shark spirit ancestor. The continuing relevance of this place in story, song, and social identity is explored, as well as the actions of the Yanyuwa to maintain and re-establish links with this homeland.

Paul Black analyses all the placenames recorded during research on the Kurtjar language of south-western Cape York Peninsula in the late 1970s. He describes the linguistic structure of those names that can be interpreted, in terms of: derivation from simple common nouns, names formed by compounding and/or affixation, names that include a locative (‘at’) suffix, and names that consist of descriptive clauses. Special attention is given to the variant forms of the locative suffix that occurs in placenames. Altogether 75 names are discussed.

The papers assembled here give a general picture of how placenames stemming from the distant past of Aboriginal cultures – but preserved through their adoption into the Anglo-Australian toponymy system, through early recording by interested educated Europeans, or through the memory of Aboriginal people – are now, after some 200 years of European presence, coming to be understood, appreciated, and in some cases restored to official recognition.