12. Why did squatters in colonial Victoria use Indigenous placenames for their sheep stations?

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The archival records of many squatters in 19th century Victoria (formerly known as the Port Phillip District) often contain brief references to the processes involved in and decisions that led to the naming of their pastoral leases. This documentation is hardly surprising given that a squatter wishing to obtain a pastoral license would have to register a legal document with the colonial government, stating among other things the name of the run. What is perplexing is why a large number of pastoralists chose an Indigenous name – given that squatters were not under any instructions to bestow ‘native names’ whenever possible – unlike the surveyors who came after them.

Most etymological discussions, in Australia at least, have largely centred on the placenames of towns, cities and geographical features such as rivers, mountains and lakes. This paper aims to explore whether the reasons offered by contemporary writers and toponymists such as Cole (1991), Carter (1995), Randall (2001) and Furphy (2002) about why Indigenous placenames were adopted by the colonial usurpers for towns, cities and geographical features also mirror the stated reasons and symbolic intent of 19th century Victorian pastoralists who chose to use Indigenous placenames when naming their pastoral leases or private places.

Names are words, they are special words – that we use to identify a person, a thing or a place. Names are *aide de memoirs* that are capable of evoking powerful emotions. By way of personal example my eldest brother’s name is Patrick. He was named after Patrick Edwards, the pilot of my father’s bomber aircraft, who during the Second World War sacrificed his life so that his crew, including my father, could live. The name ‘Patrick’ then, in my family’s household, symbolises a love and friendship pregnant with sacrifice, yet in many other households it is ‘just’ a name.

Conversely, placenames sometimes act to facilitate cultural inclusivity or exclusivity.

Discussion about Indigenous vocabulary in Australia being used by non-Indigenous people for naming natural and built features in the landscape are commonly placed into two appropriation categories, namely: imperialist and pragmatic.

The appropriation of Indigenous names whether it is for houses, suburbs, streets or geographical features has long been argued by historians and geographers to be a vehicle for cultural subordination. By way of example Hartley (1988) contended that 'As much as guns and warships, maps have been the weapons of imperialism.' Writing specifically of the colonisation process in Australia, Rosaldo (cited in Birch 2003: 154) coined the phrase 'imperialist nostalgia' to describe how the dominant culture in Australian society, the colonisers, having altered or destroyed the culture of the 'other', then appropriate it for their own gain, whilst at the same time denying their own complicity in the often aggressive devastation of the culture they have displaced. This argument is persuasive and Birch (2003) considers it is substantiated by an analysis of Sir Thomas Mitchell's journals which clearly demonstrate that as a representative of British colonial power he attached names to landscapes which were designed to legitimise the legal ownership of the culturally dominant group. This was the case whether the name was a non-Indigenous or an Indigenous one; exemplified by the fact that Mitchell (cited in Birch 2003: 155) noted 'I have always gladly adopted Aboriginal names'. Birch (2003: 155) contends that 'Mitchell was a surveyor, taking control of the land by charting it on a map. By naming features, he placed a symbolic British flag on each of them. The land was charted, ordered and labelled, becoming a colonial possession'. Mitchell is also an exemplar of colonial appropriation of Aboriginal language for the purpose of place naming for pragmatic reasons. Two pragmatic reasons for place naming are postulated by Kostanski (2003: 18–19) which Kostanski has termed: 'Colonial historical identification' and 'Anglo-Indigenous historical identification'. Kostanski notes for instance that Mitchell sought to appropriate territory for the British Crown and also had as his objective in bestowing Anglo placenames a desire to achieve recognition and fame for his surveying work and 'believed that this could be obtained through naming places of the Australian landscape'. In addition, Kostanski also draws directly upon Mitchell's journals of 1836 which reveal that 'The great convenience of using native names is obvious ... so long as any of the Aborigines can be found in the neighbourhood ... future travellers may verify my map. Whereas new names are of no use in this respect' (Mitchell 1838: 174).

But what of the 19th century pastoralists who occupied Aboriginal lands in what is now known as Victoria? Were they too willingly practising a colonialist practice of cultural theft when they appropriated Indigenous placenames for their sheep stations? It is necessary to first establish their pedigree before answering this question. It is not often articulated but the first wave of pastoralists who sought to occupy the Port Phillip District of New South Wales, as it was known until 1850, were considered illegal trespassers by the Colonial and British authorities and the newspapers of the period, hence the term 'squatter'. The squatters themselves were acutely aware of their precarious legal position and were very keen to shore up all possible credibility as legal landholders they

possibly could. In a series of letters (Mercer 1838) between two squatters at Port Phillip – John Wedge and George Mercer, it is possible to discern a palpable concern with their tenure on the lands they had claimed and the importance they placed on keeping in with Government sanction by enacting a treaty and being on the best possible terms with the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip.

The arrangements made by Sir Richard Bourke [Governor of New South Wales] to relieve us from the engagements with the Natives, by the Government taking upon itself the fulfillment of the terms agreed upon, is also prejudicial to our interests; for the Natives still expect to receive from our hands [manuscript underlined] the fulfillment of the Treaty – Nor can they be made to understand the true bearing of Sir Richard Bourke's arrangement, – and in fact, it is incumbent on those of the Association who have formed establishments still to contribute very largely to the Natives on their periodical visits; – and thus the onus of keeping up the friendly intercourse that was established by the [Batman's] treaty of 1835, devolves upon us; and be it remembered that it is the only instance of an intercourse being established with the Natives of new Holland, if with any others without bloodshed. – This ought in fairness to be taken into consideration by the Government, and to weigh in our favour (Mercer 1838, n.p.)

In this context we can see that, unlike Mitchell who possessed the imprimatur (and responsibilities) of imperial power to name and claim for the Crown, the squatters were undertaking a risky land grab for purely pecuniary purposes.

Having come across the Bass Strait with their thousands of sheep the predominately Scottish squatters immediately commenced to name the surroundings they had come to occupy as their own. Of course the landscape was not devoid of placenames as prior to permanent colonisation sealers, whalers, runaway convicts, exploration parties and two failed convict settlements had mapped and recorded many Indigenous names which are still with us today, including: Geelong, Werribee, Corio and Anakie. These early non-Indigenous sojourners had also bestowed many non-Indigenous names upon the Port Phillip District in the decades before, including: Convincing Ground, Western Port, Portland and Sealer's Cove.

The Western colonisers had a long tradition themselves of place naming according to criteria such as geography. This is evidenced by one of the instructions given to Robert Hoddle, the Government Surveyor at Port Phillip, upon commencement of his surveying work in July 1837 which was to: 'assign to each Parish a name founded on the native appellations of any hill or place therein'. Two years later in 1839 Hoddle (Clark 1998: 28) gave some indication of the difficulty and lack of relish he found in following this instruction, stating

to G.A. Robinson (Chief Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip, 1838–1850) that he (Hoddle): ‘pieces the Aboriginal names of localities – it was ordered by the government’. The squatters it should be remembered had no such imperative from any governmental authority about how to name their pastoral leases. The only placenames etiquette they observed was their own. Sadly, we have few surviving records of squatters committing to paper the reasons why they chose one name over another for their pastoral leases. By conferring with Billis and Kenyon’s (1932) list of pastoral licencees of the Port Phillip District we do know that of the hundreds of squatting runs which quickly developed into what is now Victoria that the majority maintained ‘existing Aboriginal designations’ (Wallace 2005: 156). This is perplexing given Cole’s (1991: 138) study of Victorian placenames which found that ‘Western peoples tend to use possessive, commemorative and commendatory names far more frequently than descriptive names’.

Why did such a large percentage of squatters choose to use Indigenous names for the lands they were usurping from the Indigenous custodians? Some of the reasons for their naming practices are arguably straightforward. For example there is some evidence to suggest (Matthews 1974) that a small number of squatters merely followed their age-old tradition of bestowing placenames after individuals, as Anglo-Saxons have a long tradition of doing so. A number of placenames for towns and districts in England are thought to originate from the celebration of prominent individuals such as Gig of Ipswich, Glot of Glossop and Dudda of Dudley. Aboriginal name lists from 19th century non-Indigenous records provide us with some evidence that the process of naming one’s station after an Aboriginal person almost certainly did occur. By way of example Morangourke Station may refer to Murrangurk, Moorabbin Station to Murrobin, Truganina Station to Truganinni, Bungall Station to Bungil Jem, and Tarra Creek Station to Charlie Tarra. Another likely reason for squatters to use Aboriginal language in the naming of their pastoral runs in the 19th century was the continuation of the British convention of naming of places after a prominent geographical feature. By way of example, Wormbete, a sheep station in south-west Victoria named by Henry Hopkins (Koenig 1935: 89) in 1837, reputedly was conferred this name as ‘the word Wormbete meant lake with a blackfellow’s mound’. Similarly, another squatter in the western district named his station Yan Yan Gurt, which was supposed in non-Indigenous squatter memories to mean in the local Wathawurrung language ‘ever flowing streams’, presumably indicating the presence of permanent water. Other geographical placenames of Aboriginal significance were also handed down (Koenig 1935: 89) by non-Indigenous squatters which clearly memorialised Aboriginal occupation and evidence of permanent settlement such as ‘Carrung-e Murnong [near the

township of Birregurra] a native name meaning house of yams. The yam grew well in this parish and consequently yam refuse was plentiful in the ashes and ovens around which the natives built their camps.'

Toponymists (see Redmonds 2004; Reilly 2003; Kostanski 2009) are acutely aware that a placename is not a random thing. The motivational psychology for the naming of a place depends on a range of factors and must take into account innumerable causes including historical setting, stage of cultural development of the name conferrer and their social, political, religious or patriotic background. Was the naming process a desire to commemorate Indigenous individuals and thereby to record their attachment and even loyalty to those Aboriginal individuals?

Before we answer that question it is interesting to note that there are a significant number of sheep stations which appear to have been named after the resident clan names (see Clark 2005a). If we take the Ballarat region as a representative example there are at least four sheep stations that bear the resident clan name, namely Carngham Station, Caranballac Station, Kuruck-Kuruck Station and Wardy Yalloak Station. In recent times historians (Cahir 2001; Clark 2003; Broome 2005) have increasingly come to the conclusion that an appreciable number of squatters when initially taking up their runs in Port Phillip (Victoria) often conferred with and had very amicable relationships with clan heads who offered some degree of 'education' to the squatters in the way of bush lore. Often this tutelage was in the form of hunting, finding water and gaining a modicum of understanding about Aboriginal customary laws, and possibly these squatters bestowed the clan name to their stations as a type of pacifying gift or even as a symbol of colonial reciprocity – it is difficult to know. Some semblance of the degree to which Aboriginal tutelage about Aboriginal placenames was respected by colonists, though still couched in paternalistic tones, can be gleaned from Governor La Trobe's (2006) journal (3 October 1842) which describes his arduous travels through the Port Phillip District accompanied by the Native Police and also notes an occasion where he is instructed about Aboriginal placenames:

Alone through the ranges leaving Waraneep [Warenheip] some miles to the right, the Cornish and Taylor's hut, 20 m. [miles], then 11 m. to Thomas', afterwards Beveridges. Struggle in the forest above; meet George Airey, on to Stieglitz 4 m. & 12 to Moore and Griffiths. It was at Mollison's on the morning of the 2nd that my black trooper "Dr Bailey", gave me a lesson about native names. "Mittern" -, "-Minutedon, -Momiteden, -Momitaten, -Momateden, -Momatzedon-, Monmacedon!" (La Trobe 2006: 3 October 1842)

It is possible of course that the squatters who named their sheep stations did so purely because they felt the Indigenous names 'sounded good'. Many colonists expressed their admiration of the Aboriginal names on the basis of their 'euphonious qualities'.

Squatters in the early period of colonialism such as the Kirklands who took land west of Ballarat at Trawalla (a Wathawurrung name believed to mean 'much rain') considered that the Indigenous names were preferable to English ones. Katherine Kirkland (1845: 27) wrote: 'Boning Yong is a native name and means big mountain. I like the native names very much: I think it a great pity to change them for English ones as it is often done'. Kirkland's sentiment about a preference for the Aboriginal names over English ones in Australia was not isolated. A decade later Samuel Mossman (1853), an adventurer on the Victorian goldfields mirrored Kirkland's approbation of native names:

Not that we condemn the application of her Majesty's name to this beautiful province but when scarcely a town, river or hill is found without some official's name, from the Premier down to the lowest clerk in the office, names that seldom possess euphony – the system is fulsome. The native appellations are far more characteristic and pleasing to the ear.' (Mossman 1853: 75)

Another proponent of local names William Westgarth (cited in Ross 1911: 63) exclaimed 'One is apt to wonder how that picturesque and beautiful river came to be called the Hopkins' and then Westgarth queried why give such starched, hard names, when there are Eumeralla, Wannon, Doutagalla, Modewarre, Yarra Yarra, and countless other such natural and genial modulations to be had for the asking?'. More credence is given to the euphonious sound of Aboriginal names argument by Mundy (1852: 191) who weighed into the debate claiming emphatically that: 'Some of the native names of places are grandly sonorous and polysyllabic; it is well when they are retained by the English possessors of the lands instead of substituting vulgar and unmeaning European titles'. Three decades later the discussion about the merits of native names in Victoria was still burning brightly, the focus now squarely it would seem on the musical sounding attributes of Aboriginal placenames and some little deference to Aboriginal people. It is also observable that there is a call to an emerging nationalism and doubly to acknowledge the beauty of the savage Australian bush:

Oh, spare the native names! 'Twere hard indeed

Were "Tinpot Gully" handed down to fame

As record of an old Australian name.

Does "Murderers Flat" imagination feed

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With aught of noble? Nay, we rather love
Words that possess the murmur musical
Of distant streams that through the forest fall,
Or sound of branches rustling high above:
Best Langi-Ghiran for the Eagle's Land,
Marida-Yallock for the Pleasant brook,
Corio, Yarra, sounds that well express,
In the strange language of a dusky band
Who caught their lesson from fair Nature's book,
The barbaric beauty of the wilderness. (Cuthbertson 1880 cited in
Cooper and Brown 1987: 43)

Other squatters merely revealed that they had adopted Indigenous names for their runs without providing any explicit reasons for doing so. Robert von Stieglitz's (1878, n.p.) squatting run was named 'Ballanee' and he refers in his journal to two neighbours who bestowed Wathawurrung names to their sheep stations: 'Cowie and Steed gave their new run the native name of Bunjeeltap ... my neighbour called his station "Ballynue", the native name.' Alexander Thompson (Croll and Wettenhall 1937: 29), squatting also on Wathawurrung land in the Geelong district recorded that his station 'Kardinia, is the aboriginal word for sunrise'. There is some evidence that the prolific naming of stations with local Indigenous names is not simply a superficial fondness of the rhythmic sounding native names. More complex interfaces are arguably at play which have only recently been considered by Australian historians including the argument that some settlers possibly adopted local names that sounded similar to names from back home – such as Ballan and Buchan.

The extent to which Aboriginal culture and heritage has been employed to confer Australian national identity has become a contentious issue in Australian historiography. Furphy (2002) for instance is adamant that 'the use of Aboriginal place names in Australia is not an example of sensitive cultural interplay' whilst Griffiths (1996: 5) argues that: 'Throughout their history making, Europeans sought to take hold of the land emotionally and spiritually, and they could not help but deny, displace and sometimes accommodate Aboriginal perceptions of place. They were feeling their way towards the realisation that becoming Australian would, in some senses, mean becoming "Aboriginal"'. The records left by squatters in the early period of colonisation in Victoria certainly support this supposition. Cahir (2001) has presented as evidence of transmogrification

the archival records of significant numbers of pastoralists and their workers who stated explicitly and implicitly that they had acquired a workable knowledge of the Indigenous languages where they had taken up a sheep station. It is worthwhile briefly exploring what the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations behind the invaders learning an Indigenous language were as this will allow us some insight into their place naming rationale.

Indigenous language acquisition on the colonial frontier, Cahir (2001) argues, was predominantly tied up with conferring with clan heads. Squatters often recorded, as noted previously, how they actively employed or enlisted the assistance of clan heads on their sheep stations and gathered an abundance of vital socio-economic intelligence from them. William J.T. 'Big' Clarke (1980), a squatter in the Ballarat region (at one time considered the wealthiest man in Australia) was like many other squatters in revealing that a friendly clan head had shown him his new country, guided him to local waterholes and boasted in later years of his knowledge of their language. Many squatters acknowledged that they enjoyed or endured mutually binding relationships with Indigenous people through language and assigned relationships. This was often evinced by name swapping, conferring of names and assigning of familial relationships. Clark and Cahir (2011) for example have considered the prevalence of Europeans who were recognised as deceased clan members who had returned to life and Cahir (2001) has identified the recording by squatters in colonial Victoria of the exchange of names. John Fawkner, considered one of the colonial founders of Melbourne wrote in his journal (15 December 1835 cited in Billot 1982: 21) of his discovery that Derrimut, a Boonwurrung man, had 'changed names with me this day'. In a similar vein Georgina McCrae (23 June 1843 cited in Niall 1994: 192), a pastoralist also on Boonwurrung country, wrote of the Boonwurrung's desire to 'exchange names with her children'. McCrae considered it a 'compliment to be received with good grace'. Some squatters listed the great benefits to be gained from appropriating elements of Indigenous language and culture (both material and intellectual). It seems clear that the benefits were predominately wrapped up in economic pragmatism such as the protection of their stock or securing a reliable labour force, a fact evinced by Foster Fyans (1842, n.p.), first Police Magistrate in the Port Phillip District who noted 'on my arrival here in 1837 I found scarcely an establishment in this neighbourhood without natives being employed thereon; many of them doing extremely well.'

There were also very significant degrees of indigenisation occurring on the early colonial frontier which was arguably about connecting with the land. Squatters, it has been suggested (Furphy 2002), were casting around for a new identity and certain elements of Aboriginal culture such as placenames were admissible. The evidence for this supposition is, by its very nature, as difficult to prove as it is to disprove and there are many critics. Birch (cited in Furphy 2002: 60) is sceptical

about the notion of adopted native placenames and argues it 'does not represent or recognize an Indigenous history' whilst Rackham (cited in Redmond 2004: xi) is particularly cautious in this regard and has accused toponymists of 'clutching at straws and reading into place names more than they can say' and there is some validity in this concern. Dissenting voices such as Curthoys (cited in Furphy 2002: 60) argue there is adequate evidence to contend that 'white Australians have been involved in a mythological quest to forge relationships with the landscape through literature and legend'. Cahir (2001) goes further and has argued there are sufficient accounts in the early records which clearly demonstrate that elements of Aboriginality were powerfully attractive and highly sought after by some squatters. Some squatters who had significant intercultural relationships with Aboriginal people on their sheep runs displayed their affinities via a number of out-workings. Samuel Winter Cooke (cited in Forth 1980: 3), a squatter in the south-west district of Victoria whose diaries contain many references to a living together/living apart relationship with the local clans chose the name Lake Condah for his station house as he believed (incorrectly) that the name meant Black Swan in the native language. Moreover, he instructed his brother upon his death to: 'on no account bury me in any cemetery, and if my body is taken to Murndal [the sheep station's name was a Marr word for thunder] I would like to be buried in the stones where the blacks are buried.' Some squatters penned poetry using Indigenous language, others noted minor usage of Indigenous language interspersed with English such as 'borack' for No, 'mia mia' for hut/shelter and the use of the call 'Coo-ee'. Some evidence of this non-Indigenous longing to belong can be gleaned from the golden anniversary reminiscences of Western district (Victoria) squatter, J.L. Currie in 1894 (*Camperdown Chronicle*, n.p.) who reflected upon the naming of several sheep stations he had 'entered into possession of' in 1844. Currie noted that the naming process involving Aboriginal names was not done immediately upon usurping Aboriginal land, which arguably indicates a degree of feeling for the local language is observable. Whilst it is a long theoretical bow to draw, perhaps the Australian land which Carter (1995: 403) contends was 'unknowable' for the colonists, was after some time of association with the rhythms of Aboriginal seasons and eco-cultural occurrences with place – knowable: in some small degree attainable through associative knowledge and personal relationships with the previous 'occupiers'.

The native name of the head of the spring is Anakie-boonnook. There was a strong tribe of natives, with some very fine men amongst them, owing I have no doubt to the abundance of food. In the swan egg season great numbers collected – the Elephant Marsh, Lagoon, Bailles Lake, Murnong Kiln Swamp, and c., were all favourite and extensive breeding places for waterfowl. The run was not named for some time after occupation by us. When this became necessary, and by official request,

it was named Gelengla. This I believe, was the aboriginal name for the spring at the head of Gelengla creek now Ti-Tree. The name Larra was the native name for the locality of a spring in the horse paddock ... It was pronounced by some Lawur, Larr-ach, and Larra. The last was adopted as being the best of the three, but after the name had been too well fixed to be altered, another pronounced it Lawarra, a much finer name than either. (*Camperdown Chronicle*, 28 April 1894, n.p. cited in Currie n.d, n.p.).

Even in more recent times, Wendy Lowenstein (1972: 4), a 20th century oral historian noted that in remote parts of Australia 'the old timers have a distinctive way of pronouncing local place names, and that all over Australia where men had lived and worked with Aborigines they themselves used pidgin English as part of their everyday speech, so that they spoke of being "proper cold" or "proper hungry"'.

From a purely survivalist point of view there were some sound reasons for the squatters to name their pastoral station or 'runs' a local Indigenous name.

The bush was an inhospitable place even for experienced squatters. J. Kerr (1872) duly noted 'To be lost in the bush in Australia is indeed a most forlorn and bewildering position', a fact not lost on Robert von Stieglitz (1878, n.p.), a pastoralist in the Ballarat region who described how he became totally disoriented on his new station and was rescued from perishing in the bush by Murrydeneek, a Wathawurrung clan head. Von Stieglitz, who as previously mentioned bestowed on his station an Aboriginal name and had been saved by a local clan head whom he befriended, is an exemplar of the station placename origins conundrum: for Stieglitz (1878) also openly avowed his fear of Aboriginal people, noting that on account of the local clan being 'very dangerous' he had cooperated with a neighbour to make 'blue pills' (a euphemism for strychnine) to use on the local clans. This dualism in behaviour – the befriending of clan heads, conferring of Aboriginal names for their sheep runs and deep seated murderous stance – was not an anomaly on the colonial frontier. However, many other squatters expressed their admiration for the assistance and tutelage they received from their Aboriginal mentors. George McCrae (1911: 25), a squatter at Port Phillip gave tribute by noting: 'They not only guided us accurately, but taught us many lessons in bushcraft, and in the mode of approaching game, which perhaps we should never have picked up otherwise.' Sometimes the lessons for the white squatters, or chastisement in this instance, were about naming places. Clark (2005b: 172) noted how G.A. Robinson recorded the views of his Aboriginal companions on the suitability of the name 'Monkeys Gully' in Gippsland: 'Natives joked said what for call it Monkey Creek no monkeys only opossum, said white fellow plenty stupid call it what for no give it another name.' It is certainly feasible that squatters named their stations after Aboriginal

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placenames for the purely pragmatic reason that in the case of becoming lost they would be able to ask directions from an Aboriginal person and receive very clear directions to their sheep run. Thorpe (1935: 1) draws our attention to a critical aspect of place naming for Aboriginal people which also may have played a role in non-Indigenous squatters also adopting Aboriginal names for localities around their pastoral leases: food and water. Thorpe notes simply that 'while many of the meanings may appear frivolous, yet one cannot but notice that the factor of food and water enters largely into Aboriginal nomenclature.'

Conclusion

Historians have long paraphrased the strong disparagement exhibited towards Australia's Indigenous people but surprisingly have overlooked the degree of cultural accommodation that also took place at both a conscious and subconscious level. Many authors and historians discussing the appropriation of Indigenous placenames have failed to seriously consider the duality of expressions with which the squatters considered the Indigenous people. There is a considerable body of evidence to contend that a significant degree of unconscious transmogrification occurred amongst the squatters, the early usurpers of Aboriginal land in Victoria that invoked the linking of Aboriginal placenames to land and a sense of belonging. The reasons by squatters in colonial Victoria for the widespread use of Aboriginal placenames for their sheep stations is multifarious and importantly includes a growing sense of longing to belong.

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