ABORIGINAL PLACE NAMES AND THE SETTLER AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

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A recent real estate advertisement in *The Age* for a house named ‘Baarrook’ featured the following description:

Baarrook is an Aboriginal word meaning ‘ducks on the water’. It was chosen as the name of this property by the owners, who thought it was the perfect way to evoke its idyllic surroundings.

The 1.6-hectare block at the foot of Mount Dandenong was developed 10 years ago, allowing the rear of the property to thrive under a canopy of bushland, to encourage wildlife and native flora. A grey Kangaroo stayed for about six months recently.2

The use of Aboriginal words as house names is just one example of the way Aboriginal culture has been employed to help establish a settler Australian identity. This paper explores some of the ways in which settler–Australian use (and abuse) of Aboriginal place names is related to the quest for a distinctive Australian identity. It is divided into three sections. Firstly, a brief discussion of some of the historiography of national identity, particularly in Australia. Secondly, an examination of official (or Government sanctioned) use of Aboriginal place names, and how this has been a means of asserting a settler–Australian identity. And finally, an exploration of popular (or grass roots) use of Aboriginal words and names (for example, house names, boat names and farm names). This paper argues that the use of Aboriginal place names is not an example of sensitive cultural interchange. It suggests that Aboriginal words have been appropriated at a very superficial level with little or no reference to their linguistic and cultural heritage. Moreover, this paper argues that the need to construct a distinctive settler Australian identity has been the prime motive behind the appropriation of Aboriginal place names.

*Australian Nationalism and ‘Indigenisation’*

National identity...would lose much of its fierce enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland.

Simon Schama.3

The space and landscape in which a nation grows is of great importance to the formation of national identity. Accordingly, for European settlers in Australia, the starkly different landscape has been a crucial reference point in the construction of Australian national identity. This difference in landscape has encompassed not only geographical features (climate, topography, flora and fauna) but also the indigenous peoples and cultures of Australia. In recent historiography, the extent to which Aboriginal culture and heritage has been employed to confer national identity has often been considered. David Carter (1995) argues that ‘the land has been a source of European images of distinctive Australian identity since the nineteenth century’.4 While Carter argues that the exotic nature of Australia’s indigenous flora and fauna is an obvious example of this, he goes on to argue that ‘the landscapes that work with the full power of nationing are increasingly Aboriginal landscapes’.5

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1 This paper draws on certain aspects of my MA Thesis, “I like the native names”: Aboriginal place names in settler Australian culture’ (Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2000).
2 *The Age*, 16 September 2000, Real Estate, Part Two, 1.
5 Ibid., 10.
Aboriginal culture has often been seen as the key to Australian cultural identity reconciling itself with the Australian landscape. The bush and particularly the desert (or ‘outback’) have routinely been employed as symbols of Australian identity. In this context, Aboriginal culture is often employed as a mediator in the relationship between Australian identity and the Australian landscape. This is illustrated no better than by the prominence of Ayers Rock in Australian national imagery. Here, the more recently favoured name ‘Uluru’ (a name used by the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunjtjara people) and the presence of the Mutitjulu community who now own (and rent back) the site are indicative of the perception that the ‘spiritual heart of the country’ is very much Aboriginal in its origins. Recently, Aboriginal athlete Nova Peris Kneebone was the first runner in the Australian leg of the Olympic torch relay, which began at Uluru.6

Over the last two decades, the spiritual value of Aboriginal culture in conferring Australian identity has been recognised by many critics. Tom Griffiths argued in *Hunters and Collectors*:

> 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’.7

Griffiths is one of many to recognise the ‘nationing’ power of Aboriginal culture. Anne McGrath argues that ‘white Australians have been involved in a mythological quest to forge relationships with the landscape through literature and legend’.8 Specifically, McGrath points out that Aboriginal place names were one way of achieving the goal of being distinctively Australian.9 Bruce Scates discusses representations of Aboriginality in the colonial paper, *The Boomerang*, and explores the attempt of editor William Lane ‘to aesthetise nationalism by appropriating (and re-inventing) Aboriginal motifs and imagery’.10 Robert Sellick examines the ‘jindyworobak’ literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s and identifies the tendency of this group to construct an idealised version of Aboriginality, which is fundamentally aimed at defining an Australian (literary) identity.11 Andrew Lattas has argued that ‘throughout many sections of the mass media, Aborigines are used to confer and establish a unique identity for Australian culture and for the Australian nation’.12 He has shown that Aboriginal art, music and spirituality have all been used in some way to achieve this end:

> What is currently going [on] in Australia is a spiritualising of Aborigines, whereby settler Australians are invited to give up their European mythic heritage (e.g. their white Christmas) so as to take on a new set of mythic truths focussed on the landscape they inhabit and which they must learn to spiritually possess.13

In this case, Lattas is writing specifically about the appropriation of Aboriginal art, but his comments are relevant to the appropriation of Aboriginal culture in general. Many other writers

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9 Ibid., 33.
10 Bruce Scates, ‘“We are not...[A]boriginal...we are Australian”: William Lane, Racism and the Construction of Aboriginality’, *Labour History* 72 (1997): 35.
have made similar arguments in a variety of contexts.\textsuperscript{14} The most crucial aspect of all these examples is that ‘Aboriginality is performed for the benefit of non-Aboriginal Australia’.\textsuperscript{15}

Terry Goldie has used the term ‘indigenisation’ to describe this process.\textsuperscript{16} He argues that indigenisation is a response to the paradox that, although ‘the Aborigine is Other and therefore Alien,’ it is also true that ‘the Aborigine is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien’. Denis Byrne takes a similar view when he argues that although indigenous culture was not appropriated to the same extent as was the case with the ‘Indianization’ of eighteenth-century North American settler identity:

\begin{quote}
certain aspects of Aboriginal culture were powerfully attractive to a new nation casting around for symbols and emblems of essential Australianness and some of these aspects were admissible. Aboriginal words provided original-sounding place names and were used from the earliest days of the colony.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The reasons behind this ‘indigenisation’ are complex, but some have argued that it has the effect of pushing Australia’s history back beyond 1788. David Carter argues ‘the nation’s past is pushed backwards so that one of the newest societies on earth is given one of the longest histories’.\textsuperscript{18} The incorporation of Aboriginal culture into mainstream Australian culture thus connects Australian identity with the Australian landscape. But at the same time, it glosses over the realities of imperialism and invasion.

Of the writers mentioned, only Byrne and McGrath mention the perceived ‘Australianness’ of Aboriginal place names, and even they only in passing. This paper considers many different examples of the use or appropriation of Aboriginal place names and (in each case) considers how important the ‘Australianness’ of the words was thought to be.

**Official use of Aboriginal place names**

In 1824, John Dunmore Lang — a prominent critic of the Australian colonies’ treatment of the indigenous population — wrote a satirical poem criticising the unimaginative application of place names in the colony of New South Wales. In particular, he noted that so many places were called either Goulburn or Macquarie. The last stanza of the poem called for the use of Aboriginal place names.

\begin{quote}
I like the native names, as Parramatta, 
And Illawarra, and Woolloomooloo, 
Wandowra, Woogarora, Bilkomatta,  
Tomah, Toongabbie, Mittagong, Merroo, 
Brickobble, Cumleroy, and Coolingatta,  
The Warragumby, Bargo, Burradoo,  
Cookbundoon, Carraboiga, Wingecarribbe,  
The Wollondilly, Yurombon, Bungarribbe.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Whether his poem influenced official policy is unclear, but we do know that during the 1820s, the New South Wales Government developed a fairly detailed policy for the use of Aboriginal place names.

\begin{itemize}
\item I like the native names, as Parramatta,
\item And Illawarra, and Woolloomooloo,
\item Wandowra, Woogarora, Bilkomatta,
\item Tomah, Toongabbie, Mittagong, Merroo,
\item Brickobble, Cumleroy, and Coolingatta,
\item The Warragumby, Bargo, Burradoo,
\item Cookbundoon, Carraboiga, Wingecarribbe,
\item The Wollondilly, Yurombon, Bungarribbe.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{15} Carter, ‘Future Pasts’, 11.


\textsuperscript{17} Byrne, ‘Deep Nation’, 96.

\textsuperscript{18} Carter, ‘Future Pasts’, 10.

\textsuperscript{19} Mr. Alexander Sutherland quoted this version of Lang’s poem in a speech at a meeting of the Victorian branch of the Royal Geographical Society. See *Transactions of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victoria)* 18.2 (1900): 23.
place names.20 On the 23 June 1828, Governor Darling’s Colonial Secretary forwarded instructions to the Surveyor General, Major Mitchell, that included the following directive:

That the Names of parishes, Towns and Hundreds should, as far as practicable, be determined by local circumstances, and that the Native Names should be continued or adopted, when it can be conveniently done...21

Either Mitchell pre-empted the Governor or he anticipated his wishes because two weeks earlier he had written to Assistant-Surveyor Elliot instructing him to collect as many native names as possible. He explained that ‘the natives can furnish you with names for every flat and almost every hill’.22 At this early stage, however, evidence that these names were used as part of a fit of nationalistic fervour is lacking. What is clear though, is that the extensive use of Aboriginal place names in this period meant that the perceived ‘Australianness’ of these names became something of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aboriginal place names were clearly perceived as typically ‘Australian’ by the 1870s, when the county names of both New South Wales and Victoria moved away from a tradition of British names to embrace Aboriginal names. New South Wales Surveyor General Alexander McLean had intended to follow Mitchell’s pattern of honouring notable British politicians or servicemen with a list of fifty-four county names he proposed in 1860. But Under-Secretary for Lands Michael Fitzpatrick argued for the adoption of local names and his superiors agreed.23 Fitzpatrick did not specifically mention Aboriginal names but suggested commemorating colonial explorers, governors, geologists, surveyors and speakers. However, in 1864 Surveyor General Walter Davidson once again urged his surveyors to record Aboriginal place names and several were subsequently used as county names. In Victoria, the last group of sixteen counties proclaimed were all given Aboriginal names in 1871. Prior to this none had been given Aboriginal names. It is clear that Aboriginal place names fitted into the idea of colonial identity at this time.24 The combination of names celebrating colonial figures like governors and explorers with names of indigenous origin is also present in Australia’s federal capital, which is considered below.

At around the time of Federation, when attempts to define the Australian nation became increasingly focussed, the role of Aboriginal words became more clear. At a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society of Victoria in 1900, E. J. Forbes insisted that since Federation was an ‘accomplished fact’ it was important that Australia ‘henceforth concern itself more widely with what is essentially Australian’. In this context, Forbes advocated ‘the selection, as far as possible, of euphonious aboriginal words for all future place names’.25 He was supported by many at the meeting, including Presbyterian minister and anthropologist John Mathew who recognised the ‘strong desire on the part of Australian people to give Australian names to Australian places’.26

In time, the expression of national identity through place naming was to become an obsession, in the naming of the suburbs and streets of Australia’s custom built federal capital, Canberra. We are generally told that Canberra is an Aboriginal name meaning ‘meeting place’. In fact, there are many different theories, none of them entirely convincing.27 But although the exact derivation of the word Canberra is uncertain, its status as an indigenous or ‘native’ name was an

20 For more information about official policies regarding Aboriginal place names in this period, see Chapters 1 and 2 of my MA thesis, ‘“I like the native names”: Aboriginal place names in settler Australian culture’ (Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2001).
26 Ibid., 16.
important factor behind the 1913 decision to use it (or rather retain it) for the federal capital. The Prime Minister stated in the build up to the decision that ‘whatever the selection, the name should be a native one’. On the day of the announcement, the Governor General gave his support to the Cabinet’s choice:

I believe [Canberra] is a name which will commend itself to the good sense of the country. (Hear, hear.) It has the advantage of being the name of the locality already. It is a euphonious name, and an Australian name. [my emphasis]

That an indigenous name was chosen for the new city is, in itself, testament to the growing sense that Aboriginal place names were part of an ‘Australian’ heritage. But the great care subsequently taken with the naming of the suburbs of Canberra, indeed with the naming of every street, further illustrates the important place that Aboriginal names had in the Australian psyche. The national capital was much more than a seat of government. It was to be a symbolic centre of Australian culture. In 1927, Prime Minister Bruce set up the ‘National Memorials Committee’ to consider the naming of Canberra’s suburbs, parks, avenues and streets. The guidelines that they produced noted that special regard was to be given to the following criteria:

(a) the names of persons famous in Australian exploration, navigation, pioneering, colonization, administration, politics, education, science or letters;
(b) the names of persons who have made notable contributions to the existence of Australia as a nation;
(c) the names of Australian flora;
(d) the names of things characteristic of Australia or Australians; and
(e) the words of the Aboriginal natives of Australia. [my emphasis]

When the first group of twenty-two suburbs was named on 20 September 1928, three Aboriginal names were used; Narrabundah, Yarralumla and Pialligo. In addition, the street names of Reid and Pialligo followed the theme of Aboriginal words and in these suburbs names such as Ulinga Place, Kallaroo Road, Coranderrk Street and Booroondara Street are used. With the expansion of Canberra from the 1960s onwards, many more Aboriginal names were used; from ‘Aranda’ in 1967 to ‘Gungahlin’ in 1992, twelve more suburbs received Aboriginal names. Street names in several suburbs also followed Aboriginal themes.

The Canberra suburbs of Aranda (1967) and Warramunga (1968) had street names that followed the theme ‘Names of Aboriginal Tribal Units’. The ‘Arunta’ and ‘Warramunga’ are Central Australian people, who were studied in the works of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen. It is important to note that Australia’s understanding of Aboriginal peoples, both in anthropological discourse and at a popular level of understanding had been greatly influenced by the work of Spencer and Gillen. Their examination of the ‘Dreamtime’ (Gillen’s translation of an Arunta term) has been particularly influential. Although Spencer and Gillen’s work was a technical one, the concept of the Dreamtime was quickly and superficially appropriated into mainstream Australian culture; particularly by poets and authors searching for ‘Australian’ material. The selection of these suburb names for Canberra in the late 1960s is indicative of the romanticised view of Aboriginality which prevailed at that time and which (to some extent) still exists today.

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28 The Age, 11 March 1913, 7.
29 Governor General’s speech, The Argus, 13 March 1913, 13.
30 Quoted in ACT Government, Canberra’s Suburb and Street Names (Canberra: ACT Government Printer, 1992), vol 1, 3. This five–volume reference covers every street and suburb in Canberra, and is the basis for the following discussion.
31 The ‘Arunta’ featured prominently in Spencer and Gillen’s first work, The Native Tribes of Central Australia (London: Macmillan, 1899), while both tribes were studied in more detail in the subsequent publication The Arunta: a Study of a Stone Age People (London: Macmillan, 1927).
However, in contrast, two new suburbs — Ngunnawal and Mulanggarri — named in 1991, paid tribute to the Aborigines of the Canberra region. *Ngunnawal* is the name of the local Aboriginal people, while *Mlanggarri* is a Ngunnawal word meaning ‘alive’ or ‘well–being’. The implication of these names is that indigenous people continue to live and thrive in the Australian community, and that stereotypes of the outback Aborigine loosely based on early anthropological works exclude a large number of indigenous Australians.

Although popular representations of Aboriginality are not as potent as laws and regulations governing Aboriginal people, there is little doubt that romanticised and selective representations of Aboriginal culture have contributed to the general repression of Aboriginal people and identity. Patrick Wolfe uses the term ‘Repressive Authenticity’ to describe the process by which Aboriginal people are denied an Aboriginal identity through official rhetoric such as ‘half–caste’ and ‘full–blood’. Popular representations of Aboriginality can contribute to this process by implying that ‘real’ Aboriginal people are untouched by white civilisation, and can only ever exist beyond the colonial frontier. Aboriginality is constructed as ancient or ‘regrettably lost’ and contemporary indigenous people are effectively denied their Aboriginal identity. In asserting national identity through the romanticisation of Aboriginality, certain uses of indigenous place names have consequently contributed to the repression of Aboriginal people.

**Popular use of Aboriginal names**

Nationalism has generally been even more clearly expressed in the context of popular usage of Aboriginal names; in particular, the phenomenon of the Aboriginal house name. Over the last century, many advice books have been published, providing lists of ‘Aboriginal words’ for use as house names, boat names, etc. Also, various home and lifestyle magazines have presented features advocating the use of Aboriginal house names.

Sidney Endacott published a book in 1923 titled *Australian Aboriginal Native Words and their Meanings*. The preface from this book reads:

> Australian people are now displaying a commendable inclination to favor the use of musical native aboriginal names for their homes, and the idea could perhaps be extended to other things or places that require a name, with advantage to the furthering of the growth of a distinct national feeling.

Certain aspects of this book are very typical of the genre of the Aboriginal ‘naming book’. Firstly, it appeals to national identity. Secondly, it boasts that all its words are ‘pleasant sounding’. But the main thing to note about this book, and about the genre of the naming book in general, is the way it presents Aboriginal words. The words are presented alphabetically with no reference to the particular Aboriginal language from which the word is derived, and the sense that these words are part of actual languages is not conveyed at all in several of these books.

Rex Ingamells offered an excuse for this sort of presentation in the 1950s. Ingamells was the founder of the ‘jindyworobak’ literary movement, which aimed to establish an Australian style of literature through (amongst other things) the appropriation of Aboriginal motifs. This group used the works of Spencer and Gillen extensively. Ingamells edited a naming book in 1955, which argued in its introduction:

> Since most Australian Aboriginal speech has passed for ever, never to be spoken again in proper dialect, here are simply memorials [sic] that may be freely used and may fitly lend colour to our transplanted European life in this country.

Robert Sellick, who has examined the Jindyworobaks’ use of Aboriginal words in their poetry, argues:

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The failure of the Jindyworobaks to identify a precise linguistic origin...calls into question the nature of the ‘Aboriginality’ they are presenting. The language is non-specific, unlocalised...It is as though the Aborigines are denied an individual voice.36

Most naming books express an ownership of Aboriginal words on behalf of the Australian people. H. M. Cooper’s Australian Aboriginal Words published in 1949 by the South Australian Museum, states:

The increased use in recent years of words, handed down to us by our Australian Aborigines...appears to be due to...the awakening of a genuine desire to adopt them in the knowledge that by so doing the users are strengthening, even in a small way, our memory of the former occupants of Australia.37

These expressions of ownership: ‘Our Australian Aborigines’, or ‘handed down to us’ appear again and again in this sort of literature. Many also construct Aboriginality as ancient, or in the past, and in so doing deny contemporary Aboriginal people rights to land, or worse still, the right to an Aboriginal identity.

In 1994 Macquarie University published a new style of book titled Macquarie Aboriginal Words. This book was produced by a group of linguists who wanted to convey two main points to its readership. Firstly, that there was (and still is) considerable diversity in Aboriginal languages and that the notion of one Aboriginal language often portrayed by other naming books is very misleading. Secondly, that Aboriginal words are not distinct entities but are part of rich and complex languages which can provide an insight into rich and complex cultures. Macquarie Aboriginal Words argued:

Widely available wordlists such as Endacott (1924/1990)...help perpetuate erroneous beliefs about Australian languages by listing together words from various parts of the continent, and from very different languages.38

Macquarie sought to avoid this by concentrating on seventeen Australian languages from various regions and presenting a summary of each language. The book received wide acclaim. One critic suggested that ‘there will never be another excuse for the ignorance of oversimplification’.39

Given this praise, it is unfortunate that two years later Macquarie committed the same sin of oversimplification, when they drew a sample of words out of their first publication and produced The Macquarie Aboriginal Naming Book: An Australian Guide to Naming your Home or Boat. In this publication, the words were no longer arranged according to language but according to categories such as ‘Water’ or ‘Trees’ to facilitate the quick and easy discovery of an appropriate house name. The book also made its nationalistic program only too clear:

Rather than harking back to their often European roots, many Australians are seeking names which reflect the distinctive character of the Australian landscape, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are an obvious and wealthy store of such names.40

The Macquarie back-flip illustrates how the commodification of Aboriginal culture for nationalistic purposes frequently results in oversimplification and romanticisation; and that this in turn can have a negative effect on genuine attempts to preserve indigenous heritage.

38 Nick Thieberger and William McGregor, eds. Macquarie Aboriginal Words: a dictionary of words from Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Macquarie Library, Macquarie University, 1994), xi.
**Conclusion**

The use of Aboriginal place names both at an official and popular level, has very rarely been the result of sensitive and meaningful cultural interchange. In most cases, words were appropriated with little or no reference to their layers of meaning, history, or linguistic origins. In fact, the use of Aboriginal place names has very rarely had anything to do with Aboriginal people beyond a very superficial level. It has been a settler Australian project with settler Australian motives and outcomes. The clichéd manner in which Aboriginal place names continue to be presented as national icons is illustrated no better than by the first verse of a song written in 1989 by Ian McNamara, presenter of the ABC Sunday morning radio programme ‘Australia All Over’:

> Australia has its well known names like Sydney, Melbourne, Perth,
> or Hobart, Brisbane, Newcastle no better names on Earth
> But them what sets us all apart, gives us our special posse
> Are the rhythmical, musical, wonderful names of our Aboriginal Aussie
> The original Aboriginal Australian who gave us Binnaburra,
> Billabong, Dubbo, Parramatta, Illawarra,
> Mittagong, Bega, Oodnadatta, Woolloongabba,
> Woomera, Moree, Murrugong, Wagga Wagga,
> Canberra, Boree, Yarrawonga.41

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41 Words by Ian McNamara, for the third volume of *Australia All Over*, ABC Records (1989). Words quoted in Ian D. Clark, *Sharing History: A Sense for All Australians of a Shared Ownership of Their History* (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1994), 34. There is a second verse with a similar structure.