The Australianness Of Australian Placenames

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Australia and America, although differing in numerous ways, share certain features of history, culture, and attitude. One of the historical similarities between the two lands was the sudden necessity facing the settlers of each to give names to a new landscape and to rapidly developing settlements. The English naming of Australia began just a little over two hundred years ago with the explorations of Captain James Cook along the eastern coast of the island continent. The English settlement and naming of Australia has thus been under way for about half the time of that of America, but the patterns of naming are similar. Australian names preserve Aboriginal terms, commemorate persons and events in Australian history, describe the places named, and recall persons and places abroad, much as American names do with the area and history of the United States. In addition, Australians have a penchant for nicknaming that recalls such American instances as *The Big Apple* and *The Windy City*. If anything, Australians are even fonder of nicknames than Americans are.

Sidney J. Baker, a talented amateur fascinated, like H. L. Mencken, with the language of his native country, has surveyed the Australian variety of English, especially its vocabulary. The result of his survey is *The Australian Language*, a book whose title and purpose recall Mencken's treatment of American English. Despite his generally enthusiastic appraisal of his subject, Baker had some harsh words about Australian placenames:

> One of the regrettable features of Australian place-names is their lack of originality and imagination. Many of them read like a catalogue of London suburbs, English provincial towns and U.S. castoffs. They represent a smear of dullness wiped across the Australian map. (276)

Baker's censure of Australian placenames as excessively dependent on British and US models may not, however, be quite just to the onomastic patriotism and originality of Australian name-givers. Much doubtless depends upon where one looks. The suburbs of metropolitan centers like Sydney and Melbourne may well echo those of London and nostalgically recall English villages; the surfing coast may share lifestyles and names with California and especially Florida. However, the impression one gets of names across Australia does not support Baker's conclusion, nor does a sampling of names from the historical and etymological dictionary *Place Names of Australia*, edited by A. W. Reed (an enthusiast for language and Aboriginal culture whose similarity of name to our Allen Walker Read is coincidental).

Reed's collection of placenames is far from complete and may not be typical, but it suggests at least the variety of names to be found in the land. The etymological information that follows is derived almost entirely from Reed; other information comes from works listed in the references and from personal observation.

A sample of 1000 names, approximately one-third of all those in Reed's onomasticon, has the following percentage of names with various types of origin (and a typical example of each in parentheses):

1. Aboriginal (*Canberra*)	29%
2. Australian persons (*Macquarie River*)	28%
3. British persons (*Victoria*)	8%
4. Other persons (*Mount Kosciusko*)	3%
5. Descriptive (*Blue Mountains*)	13%
6. British places (*New South Wales*)	9%
7. Other places (*American River*)	3%
8. Events (*Attack Creek*)	4%
9. Ships (*Adventure Bay*)	2%
10. Miscellaneous (*Lochinvar*)	1%

An explanation of and commentary on those ten etymological classes follows.

1. **Aboriginal Names** (29%). The largest single category of names is of those derived from Aboriginal languages. They range from the na-

tional capital, *Canberra*, to such tongue-twisters as *Warrawarrapiralilliullamalulacoupalunya* in the Northern Territory. *Canberra* is said to mean 'meeting place', certainly an appropriate designation for the site of the national parliament. It is, however, also alternatively said to mean 'woman's breasts', an allusion to the peaks of two hills in the vicinity. If the latter interpretation is correct, it has an appropriateness of its own as a name for the source from which the milk of political patronage flows out upon the land. The meaning of *Warra* [etc.] is regrettably unknown.

Aboriginal names provide the most distinctively Australian flavor to the toponymy of the country: *Ballarat* 'camping place', *Caboolture* 'carpet snake', *Dubbo* 'skull cap', *Echuca* 'meeting of the waters', *Goondiwindi* 'place of wild ducks', *Jerilderie* 'reedy place', *Korumburra* 'blowfly', *Maroochydore* 'water where the black swan lives', *Nhill* 'place of spirits', *Omeo* 'mountains', *Pinnaroo* 'tribal elder', *Queanbeyean* 'clear water', *Taroom* 'lime tree', *Ulladulla* 'safe harbor', *Wagga Wagga* 'many crows', and *Yarram* 'waterfalls'. These places are major towns that preserve Aboriginal designations, transmogrified to fit English-speaking tongues. Such names are characteristically Australian and uncharacteristic of United Kingdom suburbs or villages. They echo the 40,000-year-old culture that antedated English settlement and suggest the mythic geography of the Dreamtime that precedes and parallels ordinary time. They are primordially Australian.

2. **Australian Persons** (28%). Nearly as many names as those derived from Aboriginal sources commemorate persons who dwelt in Australia. Those so commemorated include politicians like Lachlan Macquarie, governor of New South Wales from 1809 to 1822, for whom many geographical features are named, including a harbor, a lake, a pass, a river, and a strait; military officers like Major-General Edward Buckley Wynyard, after whom towns in Tasmania and New South Wales were called; explorers like Matthew Flinders, an early voyager who named much of the coastline of Australia and who is commemorated in the names of a bay, islands, a passage, mountains, and a river; early settlers like Sergeant John Andrews, in whose memory *Soldier's Point*, NSW, was allusively, if anonymously named; convicts like Jimmy the Pieman, remembered in the name of *Pieman River*, Tasmania; and otherwise un-noteworthy in-

habitants like the daughter of a publican, John Gellions, for whom *Agnes, Victoria*, was named.

The origin of some names is disguised. *Aramac*, the name of a creek, range, and town, sounds exotic, but is said to be a pronunciation of the abbreviation "R. R. Mac" for Sir Robert Ramsay Mackenzie, Premier of Queensland, who is supposed to have carved those letters onto the trunk of a tree in the neighborhood of the places to which the name was later applied.

Persons whose physical presence in Australia gave rise to placenames are predominantly British, although they include a healthy smattering of other nationals, such as the Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman from whom *Tasmania* and the *Tasman Sea* took their names. These individuals, of whatever nationality, are those who explored, settled, exploited, or governed Australia. Their personal histories are consequently bound up with the history of the land. In commemorating such persons with toponyms, Australians are preserving glimpses of the 200years of English and European pioneering that has made the nation what it is today.

3. **British Persons** (8%). A much smaller, but still considerable, proportion of names derive from persons in the British Isles who may never have visited Australian shores, but many of whom have some connection with Australian history. Chief among these is doubtless Queen Victoria, who lent her name to the states of *Victoria* and *Queensland* as well as to the *Victoria* lake, mount, ranges, river, and spring; *Queenscliff* and *Queenstown*; and *Lake Alexandrina* (named for the Queen-to-be while she was still a princess). Other royal commemorations include *Lake Albert*, two *Albert* rivers, and *Alberton*, all after Victoria's consort, and after *Alexandra*, the Princess of Wales who was later the Queen of Edward VII.

A more remote and disguised example is *Sandy Bagots*, in South Australia. The name, which sounds like a displaced Tolkienian Middle-Earth toponym, is said to be a transmogrification of *Saint a Becket's (Pool)*, a water hole piously named but impiously mispronounced.

4. **Other Persons** (3%). A considerably smaller percentage of places are named for other persons—those who were neither dwellers in Australia nor Britons. Mount *Kosciusko*, the highest peak in Australia, was named for the Polish patriot, also remembered for his role in the

American Revolutionary War and as the builder of West Point. Lake *Amadeus* is said to have been named, not for Mozart, but for King Amadeus of Spain (1870-73). *Bonaparte Archipelago* honors Napoleon, as it seems to. Some names in this group derive from early explorers of non-British nationality.

5. **Descriptive Names** (13%). Descriptive names are those based on the appearance, use, location, flora, or fauna of a place. The *Blue Mountains* near Sydney are so called from the bluish haze with which they are often adorned. The *Cowpastures* district around Camden, NSW, was named for the use to which it was put. The name *Australia* itself is indicative of the continent's location, being a development of the term *Terra Australis* 'southern land', which appeared on maps as early as 1531 as the name of an imaginary continent in the southern hemisphere. *Botany Bay* was named by Captain Cook in 1770 for the great number of new plants found there. *Bellbird*, NSW, is doubtless named after the bird whose song at sundown is remarkably like a note struck upon a small, high-pitched bell.

6. **British Places** (9%). Of those Australian placenames that do derive from places in the United Kingdom, a large number are based on Scottish and Irish placenames. For example, a sample of names beginning with the first letter of the alphabet has twice as many from those places as from England. *Aberfeldy, Abernethy, Annandale, Ardglen, Ardlethan, Ardrossan, Armidale*, and *Ayr* all echo Scots placenames. *Antiene* is said to have been the result of a postal official's misreading of *Antrim* (after the Irish county), written in a crabbed hand on an application for approval of the latter name, and *Artarmon* commemorates an Irish ancestral home of a Provost-Marshal of New South Wales.

To be sure, there are names from England: *Albany* was named for a royal duchy, *Albury* for Aldbury in Hertfordshire, *Ashbourne* for a parish in Derbyshire, *Ashley* for the English home of a New South Wales member of parliament, and *Axedale* for a Dorset river. Nevertheless, judging from this sample of UK-based placenames, in Australia the Celtic fringe is central.

7. **Other Places** (3%). A small percentage of Australian toponyms commemorate places outside the United Kingdom. The *American River* was so named because an American seal-hunter built a ship called the *Independence* at the mouth of the river. *Ararat* was so called by the settler Horatio Spencer Wills, who recorded in his journal that his company, like the ark, rested there. *Balaklava* recalls a site on the Crimean Peninsula and the battle commemorated by Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade."

8. **Events** (4%). A small but noteworthy number of Australian names are based on events, chiefly occurrences connected with the places so named. *Cape Adieux* is the place where the early explorer Nicholas Baudin finished his effort to map the coast. *Anxious Bay* is where Matthew Flinders's ship was trapped by lack of wind in 1802. *Attack Creek* was the site of an 1860 Aboriginal attack on J. McDouall Stuart and his two companions as they attempted a south-to-north trek across the continent. *Mount Spec* in Queensland was named in the late 1800s, when minerals of potential commercial value were discovered on it, thus giving rise to speculation about the economic future of the region.

O.K., Queensland, is a now deserted town where copper was formerly mined. The name is said to have been given by miners who found a tin of "O.K." brand jam near their mining shaft and took it for an omen—unreliable, as events proved. The genesis and early history of America's most successful linguistic innovation have been brilliantly chronicled by Allen Walker Read, who has traced *OK* from a Bostonian "oll korrect," through the political catchword "Old Kinderhook," to a cornucopia of folklore. It is to be hoped that Read will write a further chapter in the history of this word and that eventually its international spread will be chronicled, including its incarnation in O.K., Australia.

9. **Ships** (2%). Coastal features are sometimes named after the ships commanded by the explorers who discovered the features. Examples include *Adventure Bay, Arnhem Land*, and *Resolution Creek*. These features were named, respectively, by Tobias Furneaux in 1773, by Matthew Flinders for a Dutch vessel that sailed by the northern coast in 1623, and to commemorate Captain Cook's anchoring his ship by the creek or inlet to get water in 1777.

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10. **Miscellaneous** (1%). A very small residue of names fits in none of the preceding categories. They include placenames based on the names of domesticated animals such as horses and dogs, literary allusions, and names that result from a pattern of naming.

Mount Polly, which J. McDouall Stuart climbed in 1859, was named for one of his favorite and most reliable horses. *Norseman*, a gold field in Western Australia, is from another horse name.

Lochinvar and *Rob Roy* are obvious literary allusions to Sir Walter Scott's works. The *Avoca River* is an evocation of a less well-known poem by Thomas Moore. Other names are even less apparent. *Struck Oil*, Queensland, might seem to commemorate a recent economic event. It is said, however, to have been taken from the title of a melodrama. Some prospectors were enthusiastic about a performance of the play they attended and borrowed the name.

A few names are motivated by an onomastic pattern that gets established and then perpetuates itself. For example, off the most northerly point of mainland Australia, a series of islands bears the names of days of the week. *Sunday Island* is said to have been named by Captain Bligh of Bounty fame on a Sunday in 1792 and *Wednesday Island* in 1789. Thereafter *Monday, Tuesday*, and *Thursday* islands were named within the paradigm thus created. The Sir James Smith Group of islands includes *Anvil, Bellows, Hammer, Coppersmith, Goldsmith, Tinsmith*, and *Forge Rock*. The streets in the township of *Southern Cross* are named for major (or large) stars: *Altair, Antares, Sirius, Spica,* and so on in a pattern not unusual in American cities, where state, tree, or presidents' names are often so used.

In the preceding ten classes of toponyms, a large majority of names are intimately connected with the history or topography of Australia. They include Aboriginal names, names commemorating Australian citizens and explorers, names descriptive of the locale, names recalling historical events, and names of ships that came to Australia. This group of "native" Australian placenames accounts for 77 percent of toponyms in the country. Names whose primary association is with the British Isles include those repeating placenames in the United Kingdom and commemorating Britons whose connection with Australia was less immediate than those in the "native" group. These British names account for about 17 percent of Australian toponyms. A bare 6 percent of Australian names are of

"foreign" origin—reproducing place names outside the UK or commemorating non-Australian and non-British persons.

On the basis of Reed's admittedly selective and not necessarily representative collection of Australian placenames, it appears that over three-quarters of Australian toponyms are firmly Aussie in origin. Even the "British" and "foreign" names have, in large measure, some particular albeit more remote Australian associations.

To be sure, a list of placenames that is selective may be distorted by the compiler's interest in some kinds of names rather than others. Lacking an exhaustive etymological list of Australian place names, we can test Reed's for possible bias by comparing it with an independent list compiled by John Atchison for a small geographical area—the northern part of the state of New South Wales. Atchison etymologizes 107 names, with results that compare interestingly with Reed's. The chief differences are as follows: Atchison has 61 percent Aboriginal names versus Reed's 29 percent; 13 percent names for Australian persons versus 28 percent; and 3 percent descriptive names versus 13 percent. The other categories from the two lists are close: 7 percent for British persons versus 8 percent; 8 percent from British places versus 9 percent; 3 percent from other places in both lists; 3 percent from events versus 4 percent; 2 percent miscellaneous versus 1 percent; and no names for other persons than Australians and Britons or ships versus 5 percent.

The similarity between Atchison's list and Reed's is most striking when the names are reduced to the three categories of "native" (80 versus 77 percent), British (16 versus 17 percent), and "foreign" (4 versus 6 percent). Both lists show that Australian placenames overwhelmingly reflect national history and characteristics, to a small degree the British heritage of Australia, and only marginally anything else. Baker's lament that Australian placenames are derived disproportionately from British and American sources seems unwarranted.

In sounding that lament, Baker may have fallen unconscious prey to the cultural cringe that his book otherwise has done much to dispel—the assumption by ex-colonials who have gained political but not yet cultural independence that their mores and folkways, or lifestyle (to use the currently fashionable term), must be inferior to that of the mother country wherever they differ. Today cultural cringe is something of a joke in Australia, but its effects linger on. Baker's incidental and undocumented

charge that US names contribute to the "smear of dullness wiped across the Australian map" is probably no more than an instance of the worldwide anti-American snobbery that is compulsory among all peoples who feel the influence of and are made insecure by the hegemony of US pop culture.

There is no real evidence that the island continent of Australia has been dimmed or smirched by either British or American placenames. On the contrary, Australia's name-giving shows originality and imagination combined with an onomastic respect for its ancient Aboriginal culture and for the heritage of its two hundred years of European settlement.

Australian onomastic imagination is shown especially in its nicknames. The language of Australia is famous for its informal vocabulary, as Australian colloquialisms enrich English worldwide. Australian proper names as well as appellatives are the beneficiaries of this Aussie informality. The nicknames mentioned here are recorded in the works listed in the references or were gathered by personal observation.

The country itself has a number of nicknames, especially characterizing ones. Early names for the continent include *New Holland* (an Anglicization of the Dutch name given by the explorer Tasman), *New (South) Wales* (a name originally applied to the eastern coast by Captain Cook, but sometimes extended to the whole continent), and *Botany Bay* (designating a bay near Sydney but sometimes also applied to the Sydney area and even the entire continent). *Australia* for the continent is due to Matthew Flinders, who preferred it to the earlier *Terra Australis*. Those names are also sometimes translated as *Land of the South*. Other geographical terms are *Down Under* and *Antipodes*, both of which, however, reflect a European bias and thus are not favored by Australians. *The Mainland* is the rest of Australia from a Tasmanian standpoint.

A number of nicknames are literary in origin. *Lucky Country* is from the ironic title of a 1964 book by Donald Horne. The punning name *Godzone* was the heading for a series of articles in the *Meanjin Quarterly*. Other terms from a literary source are the *Sunburnt Country* and the *Wide Brown Land*, both from Dorothea Mackellar's "My Country":

> I love a sunburnt country
> A land of sweeping plains
> . . . . .
> Her beauty and her terror –
> The wide brown land for me.

Bazzaland is the Australia of Barry (Bazza) McKenzie, the central character in a comic strip by Barry Humphries.

Characteristic flora and fauna give rise to the terms *Land of the Wattle* and *Kangarooland*. The epithet *The Farm* appears in the catchphrase "buying back the Farm" (from foreign investors).

The clipped diminutives *Aussie* and *Aussieland* have the variants *Ozzie* and *Oz*. The latter are sparsely recorded, being absent from works like Reed's *Place Names of Australia*. Baker's *Australian Language* has only *oz* as 'an ounce of tobacco' and *Ozzie* as 'Oswald'. The second edition of Wilkes's *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* enters *Oz* 'Australia' with relatively recent citations. The name was used as early as 1908 in the form *Oss*, but its popular use is much later and its history is unclear.

Australia's seven political subdivisions (six states and one territory) also have nicknames, some being more properly advertising slogans. New South Wales, site of the original English settlement and thus the oldest of the states, has been dubbed the *Mother State, Ma State, Ma,* and *Premier State* (the last a car-tag slogan). Its name is also shortened to *New South*, with an obsolescent variant *Sunny New South*.

The Northern Territory is clipped to the *Territory* or characterized as the *Land of the White Ant* (i.e., termite). The northernmost part of the territory is the *Top End*.

Queensland is dubbed *Bananaland* from one of its crops and the *Sunshine State* as a tourist slogan, the latter probably borrowed from Florida and thus an American influence. In the immediately southern state of New South Wales, Queensland is referred to as the *Deep North*, an allusion to its geographical relation to the "New South" and a play on the US term "Deep South." Obsolete terms are *Kanakaland* and *Nigger State*.

South Australia is called the *Wheat State* and the *Festival State*. The latter term advertises an arts festival held in Adelaide.

Tasmania (earlier *Van Diemen's Land*, whence the now obsolete *Vandemonia*) has a large number of nicknames. Diminutives are *Tassie, Tazzie, Tassieland*, and *Tassyland*. Agricultural nicknames are the *Apple Isle* or *Island* and *Raspberryland*. Tourist slogans are *Holiday Isle* and *Treasure Island*. Reflections on the size of the island in relation to the mainland are the *Spec* and *Flyspeck*. It has also been dubbed *Isle of Sleep*.

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Victoria has an agricultural nickname, the *Cabbage Garden* or *Patch*, and a tourist slogan, the *Garden State*, as well as a diminutive, *Vic*. Western Australia has a clipped form, *Westralia*; a nickname, *Groperland* (from the nickname of its inhabitants, "Sandgropers" from a bird); and tourist slogans, the *State of Excitement* and *Home of the America's Cup,* the latter of transitory accuracy.

Australian cities are also rich in nicknames. Adelaide is the *City of the Churches, Church City*, or *Holy City* from its large number of churches. It is also *Farinaceous City* or *Village*, presumably as a joke on pomposity as well as a reference to its status as the capital of the "Wheat State."

Alice Springs is clipped to *Alice* or in older use *the Alice*. It is also called the *Capital of the Centre*. (*The Centre, Red Centre, Heart, Red Heart,* or *Dead Heart* was for a brief period an administrative unit officially called *Central Australia*.)

Brisbane has the diminutives *Bris, Brisbo, Brissie, and Brizzie,* as well as the epithet *Banana City*, suitable for the capital of "Bananaland" (Queensland).

Canberra, the national capital, is put down as the *Bush Capital*.

Cloncurry has a clipped form, *Curry*.

Geelong is *Pivot City*.

Before the middle of the last century, Hobart was the *Camp*.

Melbourne was formerly known as the *City of Smells* or *Smelbourne*, because of the reputation of the neighboring Yarra as the only river that flows upside down, that is, with its muck on the surface. Other nicknames for it are *City of the Cabbage Garden* (as the capital of Victoria, "the Cabbage Garden"), *Queen City of the South*, the *Chess-board City* (presumably from the regular layout of its streets), *City of Dreadful Knights* or *Nights* (perhaps an allusion to the residence there of upper-class Australians), and the *Big Smoke* (supposedly an Aboriginal pidgin term descriptive of the appearance of the city from a distance).

Newcastle, with an allusion to its UK namesake and its own mining activities, is *Coal City*.

Perth is the *Swan City* from its location on the River Swan (named from the black swans observed by Dutch explorers of the western coast) or the *City of Lights* because lights all over the city were turned on when the first American space capsule passed over Western Australia on its flight around the Earth.

Sydney shares with Melbourne the nicknames *City of Dreadful Knights* or *Nights* and the *Big Smoke* and with Hobart, in early days, the *Camp*. Sydney suburbs have clipped nicknames, for example, Woolloomooloo as the *Loo*, and several take the -o formative: Darlinghurst as *Darlo*, Kensington as *Kenso*, and Paddington as *Paddo*. Some of these locations do indeed have proper names echoing the suburbs of London, but the Australian imagination has transformed them into distinctively Australian shapes.

Another Australian city, Toorak, is syncopated as *Trak*.

Wollongong is the *Steel City* from its industry, but more often simply *The Gong*.

Names of imaginary towns and settlements are proverbial for remote, isolated, backward locations. These towns are situated in the *Beyond* (government lands outside the areas already opened for settlement in the early 1800s) or, even more remotely, *back of the Beyond*; in the *Never-Never* (echoing a 1908 book, *We of the Never-Never*, by Mrs. Aeneas Gunn, and said to be a folk-etymologizing of Aboriginal *Nievah vahs* 'unoccupied land'); or in the *Outback*. *Black Stump* occurs chiefly in the expressions "this (or the other) side of the Black Stump" and "beyond the Black Stump." *Bourke* is a real town, but the expression "back of Bourke" denotes an uncivilized area.

Other such imaginary sites include *Buggeryville, Bullamakanka* or *Bullabakanka, Geebung* (after the term for a native plum, characterized as small and tasteless), *Oodnagalahbi* (said to be from the Mavis Bramston TV comedy show in the 1960s), *Snake Gully* (locale of the popular old radio serial *Dad and Dave*), *Speewa* (a legendary "station" or ranch, the locale for tall tales of the Outback), and *Woop Woop* (a place where the crows fly backwards to keep the dust out of their eyes). Such names exemplify the humor and creativeness of the Australian.

On the southernmost part of the Queensland coastline is an area stretching from *Southport* (named for a town in Lancashire) to *Coolangatta* (Aboriginal for 'look-out', but called directly after a ship of that name wrecked in the vicinity in 1846). This area is the *City of Gold Coast*, whose designation reflects the value of the property along the shore, the nearby Nerang River, and its branching canals. This tourist-oriented area includes the communities of *Miami, Palm Beach*, and *Surfers Paradise*. In this short stretch are names indeed derived from English provincial towns

and US cities, but also names reflecting Australia's history and heritage as well as its lifestyle at the end of the twentieth century.

Australians are still in the process of creating their national identity. The raw material from which they work is their British heritage, the Aboriginal past of the land, the many foreign influences on the country, and the two hundred years of development on the continent since the arrival of the first unwilling settlers (convicts and their warders) at Sydney Cove in 1788. Australian placenames reflect that raw material, but they also combine it in a way that is unique in its Australianness.

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Note

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