The Convincing Ground, Portland Bay, Victoria, Australia: An Exploration of the Controversy Surrounding its Onomastic History

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This paper presents the results of a case study into the historiography of the Convincing Ground toponym at Portland Bay, Victoria, Australia. This study shows that research by Connor (2005a) into the usage of the phrase "convincing ground" in nineteenth-century Australia is superficial, and his preference for one explanation of the origin of the Convincing Ground toponym that relates to intra-whaler conflict resolution is superficial and inadequate. This analysis supports the alternative narrative that the toponym has its origin in a dispute between whalers and Aborigines over possession of a beached whale. Furthermore, Connor failed to consider the possibility that the phrase "convincing ground" is polysemous, which means that we should not expect to find a singular homogenous explanation or application in the literature. He also failed to discuss the real possibility that the Convincing Ground may also be a onomastic palimpsest and that both the Aboriginal-whaler dispute narrative and the intra-whaler dispute narrative may be legitimate explanations relevant at particular moments in the place's history.

KEYWORDS Convincing Ground, polysemy, onomastic palimpsest, historiography, whaling, Aboriginal massacre site

In 2005 the so-called "History wars" over Australian Aboriginal history moved from Tasmania to a new convincing ground in Victoria, when Michael Connor (2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007; 2010) challenged the historiography behind an alleged Aboriginal massacre at a site known as the "Convincing Ground," at Allestree, on the south-west coast some 10 km north of Portland. The Convincing Ground "massacre" has been discussed by the author (Clark 1989a; 1989b; 1989c; 1990a; 1994; 1995; 2011; Clark

and Ryan, 2005), Critchett (1990); Connor (2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007; 2010), and Anderson (2006). The purpose of this paper is to revisit this earlier work and respond to Connor's critique in the context of exploring the toponymic controversy surrounding the Convincing Ground. George Augustus Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Victoria (then known as the Port Phillip District of New South Wales) from 1838 until early 1850, learned of the Convincing Ground in May 1841 during a visit to Portland, and he considered it a "remarkable" place on the coast whose name originated from severe conflict between Aborigines and Europeans. Connor (2005a) focuses on the dispute surrounding the origin of the placename "convincing ground" and implies that if the name did not exist at the time of the incident or if it had another meaning, then the massacre could not have taken place. However, my earlier analysis has shown that denying the placename does not deny the massacre (see Clark, 2011).

Origin of placename: a dispute between Aborigines and whalers over a beached whale

George Augustus Robinson is the sole source of this explanation, from information given to him by Edward Henty and James Blair during his visit to Portland in 1841. Robinson was given two explanations; however, he believed that the explanation involving a clash over a disputed whale was the most feasible. Robinson visited Portland in May 1841, and on May 16 during a meal he shared with Charles Tyers, Daniel Primrose, Edward Henty, and James Blair he learned the origin of the name Convincing Ground, which he related in his journal:

> Mr Edward Henty and Mr Blair called and spent the afternoon. We had tea and coffee, wines and dessert after dinner. Mr Henty said the Blacks at Mt Clay are a bad set and he did not think I should get a communication with them. I said I did not lay wagers but I could venture to do so in this case; that I should get to them. He related one story of their badness. He said that some time ago, I suppose two or three years, a whale broke from her moorings and went on shore. And the boats went in to get it off, when they were attack by the natives who drove them off. He said the men were so enraged that they went to the head station for their firearms and then returned to the whale, when the natives again attack them. And the whalers then let fly, to use his expression, right and left upon the natives. He said the natives did not go away but got behind trees and threw spears and stones. They, however, did not much molest them after that.
>
> There is a spot on the north shore, where the try works are I think, which is called the "Convincing Ground" and I was informed that it got its name from some transactions with the natives of the kind mentioned, so Mr Blair said. Mr Tyers however said it was because when the whalers had any disputes they went on shore and there settled it by fighting. I however think the former the most feasibly, especially after what Mr Henty himself stated. (adapted from Robinson Journal, May 16 1841 in Clark, 2000, vol. 2: 205–206)

In terms of his dinner companions, surveyor Charles Tyers had arrived at Portland on November 14 1840. Daniel Primrose was described by Robinson as clerk of the bench, sub-collector of customs and postmaster. Edward Henty arrived at Portland

on November 19 1834. James Blair was appointed Magistrate at Portland Bay in 1840 and arrived in October 1840 (Bride, 1983: 176).

Robinson added further details to his journal, the following day:

[Blank] miles from Double Corner is Messrs Hentys' fishery. This spot where the buildings are is called the Convincing Ground, see note for Sunday and Monday.

It is stated that the natives fought the whalers. Now, the cause of this fight, if such an unequal contest can be so designated, firearms [are] certain death against spears, was occasioned by the whalers going to get the whalebone from the fish, when the natives, not knowing their intentions and supposing they intended to take away the fish which the natives considered theirs and which it had been for 1000 of years previous, they of course resisted the aggression on the part of the white men. It was the first year of the fishery, and the whalers having used their guns beat them off and hence called the spot the Convincing Ground. That was because they convinced them of their mistake and which, but for their firearms, they perhaps could not have done. (Robinson Journal, May 17 1841 in Clark, 2000, vol. 2: 208)

In his official report of his 1841 journey into western Victoria, Robinson discussed the incident in the following terms:

Among the remarkable places on the coast, is the "Convincing Ground," originating in a severe conflict which took place a few years previous between the Aborigines and Whalers on which occasion a large number of the former were slain. The circumstances are that a whale had come on shore and the Natives who feed on the carcase claimed it was their own. The whalers said they would "convince them" and had recourse to firearms. On this spot a fishery is now established, (Clark, 1990b: 108; 2001, vol. 4: 21)

Origin of name: a place where whalers settled their own disputes

When Robinson was told about the Convincing Ground placename he was given a second explanation. The second, given to him by CJ Tyers, was that the name emerged because "when the whalers had any disputes they went on shore and there settled it by fighting" (Robinson Jnl 16/5/1841 in Clark 2000 vol. 2, 206). Surveyor Tyers had been in the Portland district since November 1840. However, of the two explanations given to him, Robinson considered Blair's explanation relating to a contest over a beached whale to be the most feasible, especially after what Henty had told him.

There are two nineteenth century published references to the Convincing Ground, the first from George Dunderdale (1870) gave the following explanation of the name: "the Convincing Ground, which was so-called because the whalers used to go down there to fight, and convince one another who was the best man (Dunderdale 1973, 40)." The second reference is found in a March 1888 address entitled "Victoria" given by Dr James Moorhouse, the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of Manchester, which he delivered to members of the Manchester Geographical Society, and subsequently published in the society's journal:

At last, however, two gentlemen called Henty went from Tasmania and landed at Portland. They set up an establishment, which was partly a grazing establishment and partly a fishing establishment. They catch whales there, which is, perhaps, something you did not know. This was one of the employments of the persons engaged by these Hentys. I may tell you, in passing, that it was difficult to keep order in those early days. The people were not lawless, but they were rough. And when the partners got any persons to enter their service they were apt to affirm their own independence and there was no way of reducing them to subjection and of keeping order in the little settlement but by appointing one of the partners to [be] the representative of physical force. There was a certain field, which was called the "Convincing Ground," and if any man thought he was a better man than the master, Mr Henty would say "Come to the Convincing Ground." Thither they would go, take off their coats, and try who was the better man of the two. For the most part Mr Henty thrashed his man, but if a man thrashed Mr Henty he was dismissed (Moorhouse 1888, 40).

This is an extraordinary discussion in that it places the Henty brothers as central participants in narrative. Moorhouse came to Victoria where he was installed in early 1877 as the second Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, and left Victoria in March 1886 to become the Bishop of Manchester (Badger 1974). How could Moorhouse have known this intimate detail? Who was his source? We learn from his biography that each year Moorhouse would set out on visitation tours that would last several months at a time (Rickards 1920, 104; Serle 1949), however Sturrock (2005) in her recent discussion of Moorhouse in the field implied that he concentrated his visits on Gippsland, northeast Victoria, and the goldfields, and does not give any indication that he visited the Portland district. We know from Edward Henty's obituary (*The Argus* 15/8/1887), that the Hentys were Anglican, indeed Sturrock (2005, 17) confirms that the Henty family in Melbourne were actively involved at St Stephen's Richmond, so we can assert with some certainty that Moorhouse knew the Hentys personally. What do we make of Moorhouse's statement? Presumably it came from either Edward or Frank Henty or one of their children; is it the boasting of an old man in his later years overstating his physical prowess during the early years of Portland's settlement trying to impress his listener with a crude system of employer employee dispute resolution? Does it tell us anything about the origin of the placename or does it simply provide us with a variant description of the use of the site by the Hentys? Connor (2005a: 142) argues that Robinson got it wrong, and considers that of the two accounts given to Robinson:

Tyers's suggestion was possibly more feasible, for "convincing ground" was a phrase with definite and known meanings in the nineteenth century'. In the Australian National Dictionary a convincing ground is defined as a place where prize or grudge fights were held. Illustrating usage, the dictionary gave examples ranging from an 1830 Sydney newspaper to a 1951 Australian novel. In 1898 George Dunderdale, in *The Book of the Bush*, wrote that Portland's Convincing Ground "was so-called because the whalers used to go down there to fight, and convince one another who was the best man." Dunderdale would not have read Robinson's journal and would not have known that this was the origin for the placename suggested much earlier by Tyers — he may only have been repeating what everyone in the nineteenth century took for granted. (Connor, 2005a: 142)

Connor fails to mention that Dunderdale arrived in Victoria in 1853 and never lived in the Portland district. Dunderdale arrived in Victoria in 1853 and joined the central goldfields, and within four years had settled at Colac where he commenced his first appointment in the government service. In 1869 he left western Victoria for public service in south Gippsland, from where he published *The Book of the Bush*. He published very detailed accounts of early colonial life in Victoria, some of it of events that took place before he arrived in the colony. How could he know this detail? How did he come across these "truthful sketches"? Walsh and Hooton (1998: 70) consider Dunderdale's stories and sketches "consist of historical narratives or fictional reconstructions of Australian history, dealing with the more colourful aspects of topics such as discovery and exploration, pioneering in Gippsland, convicts, shipwrecks, whaling, sealers and swagmen. Other sketches record, with disarming modesty and sardonic humour, the author's own experiences." It is possible that Dunderdale (1973: 265) knew Tyers and received information directly from him, so Tyers may be the source of the Convincing Ground gloss that he presents. Connor seems to put aside the textual criticism he applies to Robinson and his informant Blair and fails to apply it to Dunderdale; indeed, he is not fussed by these questions, but blindly accepts his explanation of the convincing ground because Dunderdale was "repeating what everyone in the nineteenth century took for granted." On the latter point Connor is being misleading and selective of nineteenth-century references to convincing grounds. It is possible that Tyers and Dunderdale were simply guessing the origin of the Convincing Ground placename by applying their understanding of its use in other contexts in Australia.

Connor (2007: 1) makes the following comment on the validity of Tyers's gloss on the toponym: "This is a completely feasible suggestion. Convincing Ground was a common term for such a place and has been used in this sense in other parts of Australia." A search of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian newspapers and publications confirms that "convincing ground" was indeed a term in common use; however, its application is not as simple or as exclusive as suggested by Connor. A brief sortie through the literature confirms that the use of the term "convincing ground" is not confined to the definition given by Partridge and Beale (2002: 250) as "The site for a grudge fight." Its use in early Sydney was as the place where convicts were hanged (Anon., 2004: 21). Anonymous (2004: 21) in *The Convict Ship "Success" the Last "Floating Hell,"* discussed public executions in early Sydney: "For a good many years the authorities in Sydney just ran up a gallows wherever they happened to require it — on Pinchgut, for instance — Lower George Street was a favorite, convincing ground, but afterward, always with an eye to the picturesque, the gallows was removed to a place known as Gallows Hill." In Brisbane in 1830 it referred to a place of punishment of prisoners, of convincing those being punished of the error of their ways. Ray Evans in *A History of Queensland* reproduces a letter to the *Monitor* newspaper in 1830, describing conditions in the penitentiary in Moreton Bay:

> There are two kinds of field days. One an itinerant or missionary field day, when the commandant goes round from gang to gang, and directs the overseers to pick out the skulkers, who are tied to a tree and flogged then and there, with fifty or a hundred lashes a piece; and parade field days, when convicts and staff are assembled on the

convincing ground [. . .] On one of these days twelve men were selected from one gang, and fourteen from another, and so on [. . .] for this new method of convincing. The punishment commenced at 9 oclock [. . .] and finished at sundown. About 3,300 lashes were given that day. (Evans, 2007: 40)

It is often used to refer to the space or ground or arena where a contest is settled, hence its common usage to refer to sporting contests such as pigeon shooting at Green Ponds in Tasmania (*Hobarton Mercury* 12/7/1854), horse racing (*The Courier*, April 12 1844; *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 17 1849; *The Argus*, October 31 1855; Wheelwright, 1861: 237), skiff racing (*Sydney Morning Herald*, December 21 1865), a ploughing competition in Longford, Tasmania (*The Mercury*, October 8 1861), boxing matches (*The Argus*, January 5 1909), trials at agricultural shows (*The Argus*, December 1 1871), shooting matches at Ballarat (*The Argus*, July 15 1862), as well as the polling booth for a parliamentary byelection in Brisbane (*The Courier*, December 17 1862). Wheelwright (1861: 237) explained, "There is also a 'convincing' ground on Emerald Hill, near Melbourne, where private matches and steeplechases come off, and where many an owner is *convinced*, to his cost, that his nag is not the flyer he took him to be." Edmund Finn (aka Garryowen, 1888: 713) described a Grand Stand serving as a convincing ground for a contortion contest known as "collar grinning," that was held on the first public race day in Victoria on March 6 1838 on Batman's Hill. The venue for Melbourne's first duel between Peter Snodgrass and William Ryrie in 1840, "a grassy common on the verge of the swamp northwardly adjoining Batman's Hill," was also referred to as "the convincing ground" (Garryowen, 1888: 777). L. E. Ward in a history of Wellington in New Zealand, discussed visits by whalers:

Sometimes there were wild attractive scenes when the whalers came ashore, after a successful season, to knock down their cheques. The taverns benefitted most by such incursions. . . . At such gatherings, especially if rival crews met, there was much boasting; hence there had to be occasional swimming contests and rowing matches, and not unfrequently there were encounters with fists to see who was the better man. The "convincing ground" usually resorted to most frequently in the early morning, was in Upper Sydney Street, where with a circle of admiring and critical and strongly partisan comrades, the principals definitely settled the question of superiority. (Ward, 1928: 170)

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (July 16 1851), there is a report regarding a fight at the Ophir Diggings near Bathurst: "On Friday afternoon a fight took place there, at what they call the 'Convincing Ground', behind a large store; and another fight for £10 was to come off on the same ground at 10 o'clock on Saturday week." The *Sydney Morning Herald* (October 2 1862) also published a report of a New South Wales Legislative Council debate on state aid, and one speaker referred to a convincing ground at some unnamed gold fields where gold diggers staged fights: "A little further on he saw a crowd, and he asked what it was, and he was told that there was the convincing ground, and going up, he found that there it was the gold diggers went to fight it out." It is also possible to find another instance of "convincing ground" surviving in a local placename — in New South Wales there is a Convincing Ground Road at Karangi, near Coffs Harbour. According to G. E. England (n.d.) the history

of this placename is as follows: "In the village at the Beacon Mines the 400 inhabitants appointed a committee to keep order in the little community. All arguments had to be settled on Sunday morning at 10 o'clock on a cleared space called the Convincing Ground."

In these examples the use of the term "convincing ground" implies overcoming, vanquishing, and winning a contest, whether it be a sporting contest or a political contest. This understanding is consistent with Blair's explanation that the placename "Convincing Ground" near Portland owes its origin to a dispute between whalers and Aborigines over a beached whale — the whalers named it convincing ground because it was where they had overcome and vanquished their Aboriginal opponents in the contest over a beached whale and they had shown the Aborigines the error of their ways, thus it is what toponymists refer to as an "incident name" commemorating an event (Hodges, 2007: 398). But equally, its use in contemporary literature is consistent with Tyers's explanation that it originated with whalers settling their disputes by fighting. Thus both explanations have credibility when compared with other vernacular uses of the term "convincing ground."

One of the curious things about Tyers's explanation is the fact that other than the Dunderdale (1870) reference and the address by Bishop Moorhouse (1888), it is not possible to find any other contemporary reference to the Convincing Ground near Portland as a place where whalers settled their disputes. Henty's writings, for example, do not discuss whalers going to the Convincing Ground to settle disputes, which is striking given Moorhouse has situated the Hentys as central to the Convincing Ground narrative. This must weaken the claim that its origin stems from a series of convincing events in which whalers went to this place to settle their grievances.

There are two toponymic possibilities not considered by Connor — the first is that the toponym "convincing ground" may be polysemic in its vernacular usage in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australasia, that is, that it is a toponym with multiple, related meanings, as seen in the variant meanings chronicled above. The second is that the "convincing ground" toponym at Allestree may be an onomastic palimpsest, representing accumulated iterations, glosses or etymologies laid one over the other, literally the accumulation and reinforcement of toponymic ideas over time. It is common to find placenames with contested histories — a careful reading of any placenames dictionary will reveal many examples. It is plausible that the dispute over possession of the beached whale predated and preempted the use of the site as a convincing ground in the Tyers's sense, where the whalers elected to settle their own disputes, that is, that it became the ground where the whalers chose to settle disputes between themselves, as they had earlier with the Aborigines. Thus it is possible that both explanations are not mutually exclusive, and may both have integrity, yet Connor does not countenance this possibility.

Conclusion

This study has shown that we have two plausible accounts of the origin of the "Convincing Ground" toponym: Blair's account that it related to a particular conflict between Aboriginal people and whalers over a beached whale; and Tyers' account that it originated from the settlement of disputes between whalers. For Attwood

(2005: 161), the controversy takes us to the heart of what he understands as some of the limitations of "historical realism" — the view of some historians "that the frontier could be known by adopting conventional scientific methods," by assuming

> that historical truth would be realised by doing large amounts of research and sifting through the so-called historical record for historical facts (which they regarded as 'hard historical evidence'). They asserted that their interpretations were grounded in the historical sources and historical facts, and they provided accounts in which they amassed examples and detail as documentary proof of the story they told.

In discussing the shortcomings of "historical realism," Attwood (2005: 162) has noted that the lack of hard documentation in academic accounts for an alleged killing "does not necessarily mean that the violence that their accounts point towards did not occur (A lack of hard evidence does not mean the absence of a violent event)." This latter point is worth reinforcing — many early colonists such as Niel Black (Journal, December 9 1839), G. T. Lloyd (1862), and Henry Meyrick (correspondence, April 30 1846) confirm that violence against Aboriginal people and Aboriginal deaths were widespread in early Victoria. Meyrick's letter reveals an unwillingness to detail this violence, and suggests that there existed in colonial Victoria an attitude of silence that preserved the anonymity of those involved and made detection extremely difficult. Connor fails to discuss this silence. Attwood (2005: 163) promotes another approach "reading the signs" as offering new potential to understand the past.

> As such, the task of the historian is not simply one of extracting information or quarrying facts from historical sources in order to reveal some reality. (Reading the signs regards this approach as necessary and crucial for historical research, but not as sufficient). Instead, the role of the historian is also one of discerning meaning in historical texts by attending to their creative dimension in order to suggest what the reality might have been. In this, historians contend that much in historical sources *points* to the real rather than *reflecting* it.

Robinson was adept at reading the signs when he met both Aboriginal people and Europeans on the frontier — he read such contextual evidence as the fractured Aboriginal demography on the Portland coast and the inter-cultural interaction he witnessed at Portland and its hinterland, especially the views he received from Henty, Blair, and Lilley, as supporting Blair's explanation of the origin of the Convincing Ground placename, and all this points to this toponymic explanation as the most likely.

This study has shown that Connor's (2005a) research into the usage of the phrase "convincing ground" in the nineteenth century has been superficial. Connor's wider research has been found wanting — his preference for one explanation of the origin of the Convincing Ground toponym over the other is biased and his examination of other uses of the term "convincing ground" is superficial and inadequate. His analysis suggests his position was predetermined. Furthermore, Connor fails to consider the possibility that the phrase "convincing ground" is polysemous, which means that we should not expect to find a singular homogenous explanation or application in the literature. He also fails to discuss the real possibility that the toponym may be a palimpsest and that both the Aboriginal-whaler dispute narrative and the intra-whaler dispute narrative may be legitimate explanations relevant at particular moments in the place's history.

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