Onomastic Palimpsests and Indigenous Renaming: Examples from Victoria, Australia

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This paper is concerned with onomastic palimpsests in Victoria, Australia, focusing in particular on the 1870s, when the deliberate erasure of colonial names and their replacement with Indigenous names was at the forefront of government policy. In contextualizing this reinstatement of Indigenous toponyms, the paper highlights the agency of parliamentarian and government minister Hon. Robert Ramsay. The primary sources of data are newspaper articles and official government reports. The methodology used is "thick description". The findings reveal that the government's efforts were grounded in the collection and collation of place names and vocabulary from Aboriginal people in the previous decade by district surveyors and other local officials. Consistent with recent campaigns in Victoria, the sustained efforts by governments in the 1870s were driven by a desire to remove duplication, erase inappropriate non-Aboriginal place names, and preserve Aboriginal place names. The campaign is unparalleled in the history of Victoria's toponymic administration.

Introduction

On 18 February 1891, at the official opening of the Watts River Waterworks, it was formally announced that it was thenceforth to be known as the *Maroondah Aqueduct*. The replacement of a European-derived hydronym with an Aboriginal name was the outcome of 10 years of research and agitation by James Dawson, a western Victorian identity with a long history of passionate support for Aboriginal interests (Clark 2016, 2017). Dawson, who had been associated with the upper Yarra River district in the early 1840s, was affronted by the prospect of the aqueduct being named after a former convict employee. He believed that this and other names "tinged with the blood of convicts and rebels" should be replaced with "native names" (Dawson 1881, 7). Dawson recommended that someone should approach the Aboriginal residents at the nearby

government-run Coranderrk Aboriginal station and obtain the native name from them, as had been done in the earlier naming of the Yan Yean Reservoir, Melbourne's first artificial reservoir, completed in 1857. It is possible to understand the layering of colonial names over Aboriginal names through the lens of "sequent occupance", a concept articulated by historical geographer Derwent Whittlesey (1929) as a way of describing and interpreting succession in cultural landscapes. Whittlesey believed that analysis of the cultural landscape in a given area should reveal the features that have survived from earlier occupancies. From an onomastic perspective, the cultural landscape or "namescape" is a palimpsest in which it is possible to identify toponyms laid down in different periods surviving as a cultural impress in the landscape. Thus, in a "colonial situation", such as Australia's, where there have been settler colonialism and a succession of occupation, a mixture of toponyms should reflect the sequence of occupation. In the context of the study area, the cultural landscape of colonial Victoria has an ancient layer of Indigenous names, some of which have been erased by European and other non-Indigenous names. This study, however, is not concerned with the erasure of Indigenous toponyms per se, but with efforts by the state and leading public officials to reinstate Indigenous toponyms and repossess named colonial spaces with Indigenous toponyms that survive from the earlier Aboriginal or precolonial occupance. In Dawson's letter, he referred to the efforts of the Hon. Robert Ramsay and his ministry to substitute native names for colonial names such as "Cut Throat Gully" and "Murderer's Creek" (Dawson 1881, 7). Ramsay served as a member of the Victorian parliament from 1870 until three weeks before his death from pleurisy, at the age of 40, in 1882 (Curry 2017). He served in various governments as Postmaster General (1874–1875, 1877). During Ramsay's time in the Victorian parliament, successive Victorian governments were actively introducing Aboriginal toponyms for unnamed features (in the eyes of European colonists, at least), such as mountain peaks and newly created counties and electoral districts; and replacing the names of post offices and railway stations with Indigenous toponyms. The public officials instrumental in these changes included: John Alexander Macpherson, the Commissioner of Lands; Alexander John Skene, the Surveyor-General; and Robert Ramsay, the Postmaster General. Alfred William Howitt, warden and police magistrate at Bairnsdale, and Robert Brough Smyth, the Secretary of Mines and Honorary Secretary to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, also played a role in the process of facilitating access to Aboriginal toponyms. Smyth had been instrumental in the collection of Aboriginal vocabulary, when in 1863 he sent circulars throughout Victoria to local guardians, who maintained a correspondence with the Aboriginal Board, requesting they provide him with local Aboriginal vocabulary. These terms were collated and included in his 1878 two-volume ethnography published by the Victorian Government Printer. In 1869, Smyth forwarded another circular, this time with a portion of the map of Victoria, to every local guardian. In this mailing, he requested that they "ascertain the native names of the rivers, creeks, hills, ranges, and other natural features in their several districts" (Smyth 1878, vol. 2, 174). These lists were also published in his 1878 work, along with an extensive list provided by the Surveyor-General's office, collated from toponyms supplied by district surveyors. In January 1871, Commissioner Macpherson and Surveyor-General Skene conferred Aboriginal names on newly created counties in Victoria, and replaced some existing county names with Indigenous names. The "new" names included *Millewa*, *Weeah*, *Lowan*, *Karkrooc*, *Kara-Kara*, *Gunbower*, *Delatite*,

Bogong, *Wonnangatta*, *Croajingolong*, and *Buln-buln* (*The Age*, January 26, 1871, 2). The *Wesleyan Chronicle* approved of the changes (in *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, July 29, 1871, 2). In September 1872, the Survey Department released a new map of the Colony of Victoria, containing the "new" county names. *The Argus* newspaper was unimpressed with the choice of some of the Indigenous names, claiming they were not melodious and questioning their geographical applicability (September 7, 1872, 6). *The Argus* took particular umbrage at the choice of *Croajingolong* in east Gippsland, considering it difficult to pronounce:

> it will require a man with a tolerably thick skin to represent a constituency with such a name, and he will be a grave man, who, as Speaker, could call the hon. member for Croajingolong to order, without at the same time allowing a smile to disturb the clam repose of his features. (September 7, 1872, 6)

In February 1874, the governor of Victoria, along with Skene and Smyth, toured Gippsland. The *Bacchus Marsh Express* (February 21, 1874, 4) reported that:

> One advantage that will accrue from this visit will be the change, as soon as practicable, of the names of prominent heights, etc., having no meaning, substituting for them the names by which they were known by the natives where they are known, and where they are not known, at any rate by more appropriate names than have been given them hitherto.

The party was guided by A.W. Howitt, who was "tasked with the duty, which he kindly accepted, of finding out the names given by the aborigines to the most prominent peaks" (*Bacchus Marsh Express*, February 21, 1874, 4). As a result, several mountain peaks hitherto "unknown" and "unnamed" were vested with native names. As Postmaster General, Ramsay oversaw a major expansion in postal services across the colony and strove to ensure that new post office names were given Indigenous names. Staff from the Post Office and Telegraph Department wrote to relevant councils and asked them to suggest "native names" (see *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, November 14, 1874, 3; December 12, 1874, 4; February 20, 1875, 1). In the department's annual report for the year 1873, it was announced that 34 new post offices had been opened, of which 14 had Indigenous names, and three post office names were changed, including *Tooliorook* to *Derrinallum* (Victoria 1874). After Ramsay became Postmaster General in 1874, the impact of his leadership became evident in the increased use of Indigenous names and the larger number of changes that involved Aboriginal names. During 1874, 41 new post offices were opened, of which 25 were given Indigenous names. Fifteen post office names were changed, including: *Godfrey's Creek* to *Gobur*; *Oxley Plains* to *Milawa*; *Brandy Creek* to *Buln Buln*; *Bulldog Flat* to *Illabarook*; *Hovell's Creek* to *Lara*; *Cockatoo* to *Narrigal*; *Hit-or-Miss* to *Kooroocheang*; *Growler's Creek* to *Wandiligong*; and *Donnybrook* to *Kalkallo* (Victoria 1875). In 1875, 54 new post offices were opened, of which all but 18 had Indigenous names. Sixteen post office names were changed, including: *Mount Noorat* to *Noorat*; *Cabbage Tree* to *Yangardook*; *Leigh Road* to *Wabdallah*; *Devil's Creek* to *Bolwarra*; *Duck Holes* to *Monegatta*; *Gap* to *Buttlejork*; *Jones' Creek* to *Waanyarra*; *Muddy Creek Bridge* to *Moorilim*; *Sailor's Gully* to *Nerring*; and *Scotchman's Lead* to *Yarrowee* (Victoria 1876). In 1876, 35 new post offices were opened; all but 16 had Indigenous names, and nine changes of name took place, including *Break of Day* to *Corindhap* (Victoria 1877). In 1877, 68 new post offices were opened, and all but 20 had Indigenous names. Eight post office names were changed, but with the exception of *Wycheproof* changing to

Mount Wycheproof they did not involve Aboriginal names (Victoria 1878). Post office expansion continued in 1878, after Ramsay's tenure as Postmaster General ended. A total of 64 new offices opened, of which all but 25 had Indigenous names, and 11 names were changed, including *Khull's Range* to *Katandra* (Victoria 1879). Sixty-five new post offices opened in 1879, of which all but 22 were Indigenous; six office names were changed (Victoria 1880). During Ramsay's tenure as Postmaster General, some 200 new post offices were created, of which approximately 130 had Aboriginal names (65%); and some 50 post office names were changed, of which approximately 20 were changed to Aboriginal names (40%). At times, Indigenous place names were replaced with other Indigenous names, such as: *Lallat* to *Karkarooc* (*Hamilton Spectator*, February 27, 1875, 4); *Yangardook* to *Couangalt*; *Mundoona* to *Wyuna*; *Marida Yallock* to *Naroghid* (Victoria 1876, 6); *Karkarooc* to *Rupanyup*; *Buninyong Rail Station* to *Yendon*; *Mologa* to *Cohuna*; *Karimba* to *Mundoona* (Victoria 1877); *Drouin* to *Jindivick*; *Ulupna West* to *Yielima* (Victoria 1879); *Echunga* to *Weeweerup*; and *Mundoona* to *Bunbartha* (Victoria 1880). On rare occasions, however, Indigenous place names were replaced with European names, such as: *Bontherambo* to *Springhurst*, 1874 (Victoria 1875); *Yowen Hill* to *Charlton East* in 1876 (Victoria 1877); and *Wyuna* to *St Germains* in 1878 (Victoria 1879). The *Hamilton Spectator* reported the change of *Lallat* to *Karkarooc*, noting that the "new office receives this name from some native name given to a creek nearby it" (*Hamilton Spectator*, February 27, 1875, 4). *Figaro*, although supportive of the campaign, was critical of the replacement of some Indigenous names with other Indigenous names and questioned the difficulty of pronunciation and euphony of some of the "new" names, citing the change of *Lallat* to *Rupanyup*, as an example:

> I have before now expressed my distaste to many of the names that have been given to localities in this colony; at the same time expressing my preference for native appellations over such as "Brandy Creek," "Dead Horse Gully," and so forth. Generally speaking the names of native origin are far more euphonious; and, so far as I know, certainly less vulgar. But notwithstanding this antipathy, I fail to see the necessity for changing one native name for another when nothing is apparently gained by so doing. I think "Lallat" is in every respect preferable to "Rupanyup." It is **shorter, more easy** of pronunciation, and euphonically better. But I find from the last number of the *Gazette* that the latter name has, "by authority," been substituted for the former. If I had my choice, I should unquestionably prefer to live at Lallat rather than at Rupanyup – especially if my avocation necessitated my frequently writing or speaking the name. The latter is such a terrible mouthful. (*The Telegraph, St Kilda, Prahran and South Yarra Guardian*, April 8, 1876, 3) [emphasis in original]

The *Weekly Times* highlighted Ramsay's efforts at replacing "outlandish names" conferred by "uncultivated diggers" during the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s (May 1, 1875, 10; also see *Mount Alexander Mail*, April 28, 1875). The editor of *The Ballarat Star* was supportive of the renaming campaign:

> The idea of changing what are in many cases hideous names of places for native names is one which must meet with the approbation of all. Who would not sooner have the place they lived in called Illawarra than Bulldog, or Bolwarra than Devil's Creek? (*The Ballarat Star*, April 5, 1876, 2)

However, some newspaper editors and contributors did not support the initiative and expressed their distaste with the removal of "old familiar names". The Rosedale

correspondent of the *Gippsland Times*, for example, preferred the language of Milton and Shakespeare over that of Aboriginal languages:

> We are not altogether in raptures about the change made in some of our "old familiar names." What advantage is to accrue by transforming "Merton" with all its pleasant associations, home and colonial, into the "Coolun Coolun" of some possum-eating gin-thrashing blackfellow? Native names are euphonious, so it is said, but we have yet to learn something if we are to rely upon the linguistics pertaining to Jacky Jacky or King Jimmy, to provide for the deficiencies of that language which sufficed Milton and Shakespeare. There may be, however, a re-action some day, and the process be inverted, such for instance as altering Echuca into "Dummie Dummie". (*Gippsland Times*, January 19, 1875, 3)

In 1877, a newspaper correspondent from Durham Ox expressed his preference for the euphony of Aboriginal toponyms and praised the efforts of the Victorian government to preserve "native names":

> There is, I think, far greater euphony in the aboriginal names of localities than in those frequently used. It was – if my memory serves – Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (a man of good taste in such matters), who called attention to the desirability of preserving the native names, for which he has my thanks, and deserves the thanks of Victorians generally. I am an admirer of plain Saxon, but the line must be drawn somewhere, and I confess I have a decided preference for such names as Geelong, Ballaarat, Kerang, Towan Gurr, &c, &c, than for any of the European designations of places highly suggestive as some of them are; as for example, Pinch Gut, Murderer's Flat, Devil's Kitchen, Dead Horse, Peg Leg, &c. In future then with your permission, I will send my contributions of news from Towan Gurr (late Durham Ox). (*Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette*, November 23, 1877, 3)

In a second opinion piece, the same correspondent explained that the government's justification for its preference for the use of "native names" was to remove duplication and to preserve Aboriginal place names:

> We think it was the Hon. J.J. Casey, who while in office laid down, the rule that whenever possible native names of places should be used throughout the colony in preference to any other. Doubtless this rule was the outcome of a twofold intention, one to prevent the possibility of several places having a similar name, and the other to preserve some traces of the race that once had the possession of this fair land. Native names have a soft musical sound when properly, pronounced, owing to the absence of gutturals or throat sounds in their language. It is needless to give instances as they may be noticed in every newspaper in the colony. (*Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette*, October 18, 1878, 2)

In March 1879, a deputation of residents from Ballyshanassy, a village in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, named after John O'Shanassy, Victoria's second premier, sought to have the name of their local post office and district changed to *Auburn*. Francis Longmore, the Commissioner for Crown Lands, suggested "that a native name should be fixed upon, and advised the deputation to get hold of a 'blackfellow' who would be able to oblige them with something choice from a barbarous nomenclature" (*Geelong Advertiser*, March 15, 1879, 4). Longmore's advice went unheeded, and the deputation was partially successful: Ballyshanassy post office was changed, not to *Auburn*, but to *Burwood* (*The Argus*, May 31, 1879). A correspondent who used the moniker *Codger*, while supportive of the efforts to reduce duplication of place names, was concerned about the spelling and pronunciation of Aboriginal names. *Codger* also raised doubts about the "authenticity" of some of the names proposed:

In a measure I agree with F. as to the folly of duplicating names, as was done in the States, to everyone's confusion; but, touching euphony, it is a clear toss up for poetry between Ballyshanassy and Cut-paw-paw, Watchegatcheeka and Healesville. There are not many *bona fide* native names that are easy to spell and pronounce. Mention the soft Moira, and a little research will convince you that it comes from the land of Tom Moore's nativity [*sic*]. Tallangatta and Wangaratta are genuine enough, but the bulk of the names which we sketch our imagination and veracity to admire are evolved from the inner consciousness of clerks in the Crown Lands Office, who understand aboriginal about as well as a scratch chorus in the opera understand Italian "*Si fortuna me tormento, sperato me contenta*." … The subject needs careful consideration. It is not to be dismissed by the timeworn conundrum, What's in a name? … Everything. (1879, 4)

In 1881, *The Argus* discussed the merits of a campaign by residents in Wandong, north of Melbourne, to change their town's name from its Aboriginal name to *Huntsville* or *Huntsdale*, in honor of their local parliamentary representative. The editorialist was opposed to the change and, in acknowledging that *Wandong* was bestowed upon the town through the agency of Robert Ramsay, expressed support for the retention of Aboriginal place names. He also expressed his hope that the Postmaster General and the Minister of Lands would dismiss the proposal (*The Argus*, December 17, 1881, 9). The next acknowledgment of the agency of Robert Ramsay to retain Aboriginal nomenclature came in 1883, when a writer using the moniker "O.K." published an article in which he or she detailed an excursion of eight people to Mt Bogong, in northeast Victoria. On the summit, one of the party, whom O.K. chose to call "Sandstone", gave his/her fellow climbers a "discourse, ethnological and philological" (O.K. 1883, 1) in which Ramsay's efforts were acknowledged. During the campaign to rename the *Grampians* mountain range *Gariwerd* in the early 1990s, one of many issues that surfaced was that reinstatement of Indigenous toponyms involved erasure of colonial toponyms, although the fact that the colonial toponym had dispossessed an Indigenous toponym was not a concern for many residents. As a way through this tension, naming authorities moved away from a policy of "one name, one place" to allow for the possibility of dual naming. Of course, there are examples where prominent landscape features have three or more Indigenous names owing to the fact that they are visible to different Aboriginal language groups. Existing government policy in Victoria does not allow for the use of three or more names for the one place. Cultural and historical issues are some of the many factors involved in reinstating Indigenous toponyms. Others are linguistic (especially phonological and semantic) and sociopolitical (e.g. the extent of Indigenous agency in the process (Kostanski 2016)). There are times when Indigenous toponyms are opaque and their meaning is unknown, although knowing the meaning of a toponym is not a guarantee of its successful reinstatement – two examples come to mind in the Grampians-Gariwerd campaign. The Aboriginal name for *Mt Stapylton*, a prominent feature in the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park, is *Gunigalk*, which means "excrement stick" and is a reference to the spatulas or small digging sticks Indigenous people used to bury their excrement to ensure that it did not fall into enemies' hands and be used in harming practices (Clark and Harradine 1990). The local tourism association opposed this name, asserting that they could not allow a prominent feature to be called "excrement stick". Another name that was not reinstated was *Migunang-Wirap*, meaning "where the blackfish can go no higher", the local name for *McKenzie's Falls*, a prominent tourist attraction in the national park.

Conclusion

This study has uncovered a period of active and sustained renaming in Victoria that has hitherto been relatively unknown and under-researched. During this time, the deliberate erasure of colonial names and their replacement with Indigenous names was at the forefront of government policy. Successive Victorian colonial governments between 1872 and 1882 sought to reinstate Indigenous place names and/or confer Indigenous place names on newly created entities such as counties, electoral districts, railway stations, schools, and post offices. The drivers for this reinstatement were a desire to remove duplication, erase undesirable European names, and preserve Indigenous toponymy. Indigenous place names were collected from Aboriginal people by the Office of the Surveyor General, and R.B. Smyth, the Secretary of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Many of these names were published in Smyth's (1878) two-volume ethnography of Victoria. However, it was parliamentarian and government minister Hon. Robert Ramsay who was the primary agent of change. Since Ramsay's tenure, there have been several well-known campaigns to change Victoria's onomastic palimpsest, such as the naming of *Maroondah Aqueduct* in 1891, the renaming of features in the Grampians National Park in the early 1990s, and the removal of the highly offensive name *Mount Niggerhead* in northeast Victoria in 2008.[1] In terms of scale and magnitude, however, current efforts do not compare with the period of naming and renaming that occurred in the 1870s. Kostanski (2016) and Newton (2016) have shown how cultural hegemony has pushed Indigenous cultural heritage to the periphery of mainstream Australian identity to such an extent that Indigenous toponymic heritage is deemed to be unimportant. With the exception of the period covered by this study and the 1990s Grampians-Gariwerd campaign, reinstatement of Indigenous toponyms has not been a priority in Victoria. Despite the existence of a significant corpus of Aboriginal toponyms across Victoria that have been overwritten (see Clark and Haydon 2002), there has been little motivation on the part of government to embark on an active campaign of reinstatement of Indigenous toponyms. A provision now exists in Victoria for the dual naming of places, so it is possible to reinstate Indigenous names without removing existing colonial names for which there may be significant attachment, identity, and dependence. The reinstatement of Indigenous toponyms is an important means of valuing Indigenous heritage. Were naming authorities to undertake name restoration programs in good faith through community-based consultations driven by Aboriginal agency, with an educative process that explains why Indigenous names should be restored alongside existing non-Indigenous names, Victoria would experience another significant superimposition on its onomastic palimpsest.

Note

[1] However, the latter, strictly speaking, is not a reinstatement as it was not possible to uncover an Indigenous toponym for this topographical feature, so a place name was "invented". It was renamed *Jaithmathangs*, after one of the traditional languages spoken in northeast Victoria.

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