

## Notes on Gippsland Aboriginal Names

Peter Gardner

### 1. The Meaning of the word "Munjie"(1)

The meaning of the word "munjie", amongst other things, is mentioned in an article by John O'Rourke (2). This word has been given various attributed meanings including 'fish' by the Aboriginal Protector George Augustus Robinson. But almost certainly the true meaning, as recorded a number of times by Alfred Howitt, is 'place'. Hence Bukkanmunjie, the original name for Buchan, and also mentioned by O'Rourke, is "place of the woman's bag" and not "evil spirit of the jumping water" as O'Rourke claimed. John O'Rourke wrote:

"Coming through from New South Wales one passes through 'rapid water' country, falling into Victoria, and it is found that the (word) Munjie occurs very frequently. Some of the New South Wales blackfellows claim Omeo as their territory, and there are lots of Munjies about there - Hiinomunjie, Tongiomunjie, Lumlamunjie, etc. When you came down to the still water the munjies ceased and I claim this finally proves that the name of the blackfellows for 'jumping water' was munjie." (3)

O'Rourke continued:

"There is another instance in the Mullick Munjie River, which empties into the Buchan. Formerly it was known as Quag Quag Munjie (4). When the blackfellows became acquainted with milk they used also to call it mullick, and this river is a series of steep rapids, the water coming down like an avalanche of snow, so I presume they changed it in mullick, owing to the foam reminding them of milk." (5)

Unfortunately O'Rourke has found an elaborate solution for a simple problem. Rather than the tautology of "rapids like milk / jumping water" it is more likely "the place of the rapids / river like milk". The words 'mullick' or 'mellick' being merely Pidgin English are not in dispute. What is certain is that the word 'munjie' was used fairly widely across tribal and language boundaries and mostly, though not exclusively; in the alpine and sub alpine districts and its language origin is not known. It should also be noted that 'munjie' was used in individual names just as place names of origin have been used for individuals in the English language. Two that come to mind are Bruthenmunjie and Harry Derramunjie.

## **2. Place Names and Bilingual Signs (6)**

Alistair Moffat in his *The Sea Kingdoms: the story of Celtic Britain and Ireland* (Harper/Collins, London, 2001) mentions the use of bilingual signs throughout Wales as an example of the progress towards maintenance of the Welsh language. It occurred to me that although the Kurnai language is technically dead a similar program could be instituted here in Gippsland, at least in part. There is now a small body of academic and published work on the Kurnai language. Bilingual signs, whether in Wales or Gippsland, make people more aware of the previous occupants of the land. Whilst there is some doubt and debate about a number of Aboriginal place names there seems no reason why bilingual signs could not be easily introduced where there is one generally accepted Aboriginal name. For instance in the old Omeo Shire most of the place names above the Gap (north of the divide) already have Aboriginal names whilst for the district below the Gap the converse is true. In these places Alfred Howitt has recorded both the Aboriginal place names and their meanings. Thus I write this in my shop at Swifts Creek or Bun Jirrah Gingee Munjie (big kangaroos go to that place) before returning home to Ensay or Numblamunjie (blackfish place) or travelling through Tambo Crossing or Neoyang (eel/eel water?). No doubt this is a small step but it is one easily taken and a substantial step towards both recognition and reconciliation. Earlier this year (2004) there was a debate in the 'letters to the editor' column of the Bairnsdale Advertiser over the possible reversion of the name Paynesville to the original Toonalook (various spellings) which does not appear to have come to anything. Perhaps the use of bilingual signs is a solution to this debate. From my previous experience with place name derivations I am sure that this action would also be attractive to tourists and visitors.

## **3. Notes on Gippsland Aboriginal Place Names (7)**

I have a number of projects on which I initiated research many years ago that have not come to fruition. These include several that involved a significant amount of research and were originally undertaken with the possible end result being a publication of some sort. Two of these possible 'publications' come readily to mind - one I tentatively called *The Kurnai Dictionary of Biography* (8) and the other *Names and Places of Aboriginal Gippsland*....The latter work on names and places of Aboriginal Gippsland had barely progressed beyond the original concept [when it] was more or less superseded by my series of booklets written and published in the nineties on the place names of Gippsland. These popular booklets were designed for tourists and travellers and were what I considered 'light ' history. Part of the formula for these booklets was to include as many Aboriginal names as possible and to briefly write in all the places of Aboriginal interest. The booklets also included brief notes (500-1000 words) on the Aborigines of each particular area.

I remain very interested in the Aboriginal nomenclature. As early as 1990 - before I had embarked on the Gippsland names series - I had written in an unpublished essay on Victorian Alpine Aborigines:

In a paper to the Historic Places Branch I made some observations on the names of natural features, places etc. Of these the two most important were firstly that all features were named by the Aborigines and that some features may have had three to four different names and secondly that it is surprising how many of these names have survived. A point I only touched on briefly in my paper was the detail with which the countryside was named. Unfortunately only [a] few examples of this richness of detail survive and these are not in the Alpine region. One example collected by surveyors Pettit and Dawson (9) lists twenty-five specific place names on and near the Tambo River in the vicinity of Swan Reach in Gippsland, where now there are only a handful of European ones. This example would indicate that although about half the names retained in the Alpine region are of Aboriginal origin, most of the Aboriginal names, probably more than 90%, have been irretrievably lost. (10)

I concluded:

The study of Aboriginal nomenclature is fascinating despite the pitfalls. These include unknown meanings, unknown tribal and language origins, the myriad spellings, and errors of transcription or translation. One result of this is that many Aboriginal place names have been incorrectly translated and consequently given vague or even spurious meaning, the latter error is exceedingly common in many 'general' Aboriginal place name lexicons where little attention is placed on local languages or name origins. Another has been incorrectly attributing certain Aboriginal place names to specific localities. (11)

No doubt scholarship and interest in this field will continue unabated. One area which will probably prove a rich resource for future scholars is the surveyor's records, mostly to be located in the Public Records Office of Victoria. The abundant use of Aboriginal names for both parish and county, most of which appear to be of local language origins, indicates a close liaison between the surveyors and local Aborigines, at least for large parts of eastern Victoria.

#### **4. Some Commonsense (and perhaps obvious) Observations of the Nomenclature of Natural Features, places etc [of the Victorian High Country] (12)**

This outline is by no means exhaustive and is meant to be a guide only that may assist the analysis and understanding of any further detailed studies that may be made of names in the [LCC] Alpine Study area.

##### **Aboriginal Names**

1. All prominent features certainly had Aboriginal names and it is surprising how many of these have survived. These include town names (e.g. Omeo formerly the name of the lake), rivers (Tambo), mountains (e.g. Cobberas) and it would seem that roughly half of the current names of the Alps are of Aboriginal origin.

2. It is most likely that prominent features near tribal boundaries had several Aboriginal names. That is, one different name for each of the tribal groupings associated with that feature. It is also possible that different names existed for the same feature within a tribal group. For instance the Snowy River had different names at different places. (This appears to be generally accepted – that places on the river were named rather than the river itself.) At Orbost the river was called Dura, whilst upstream it was known as Care-rang-gil.
3. Most Aboriginal names were descriptive, and often involved animals.
4. Some Aboriginal names have come from sources outside of the original tribal area. For instance Baw Baw appears to be the Wurundjeri name for that mountain and the Brayakaulung name is not known. However it is possible that the clan of the Wurundjeri in the mountain district did have access to this mountain.
5. The sources and meanings of some Aboriginal names have caused some debate and some have been confused with English names and expressions. The most interesting example of this is in the origins of the word ‘omeo’ which is supposed to have been uttered as an exclamation of delight by one of the early squatters when sighting the Omeo plains. This romantic inaccuracy has much credence with local historians. But Lhotsky’s map of the region clearly shows the lake and the plains at ‘Omio’ which meant that it was an original name, if not of the Jaitmathang, then at least of the Ngarigo. The meaning of the word is still not known.
6. Many European translations from Aboriginal sources have probably been distorted. For example Mt Bogong is supposed to mean “big fella”, when according to Elyne Mitchell, it is merely the common word for rocky peak, our equivalent of mountain. Mitchell noted that there were various ‘bogongs’ throughout the Australian alps and in particular noted Dicky Cooper’s Bogong, named after the Krauatungalung Aboriginal of that name. No doubt the ‘big fella’ was just an extra description of that particular ‘bogong’ which happens to be Victoria’s highest mountain.
7. There are examples of Europeans replacing the original Aboriginal name with another. The name of Wangaratta, which means sitting cormorant, appears to fall in this category. The original name for the junction of the King and Ovens Rivers was ‘korumbeia’ or high river banks.
8. A number of names given by Europeans are indicative of former Aboriginal occupation e.g. Blackfellows Flat, Black Camp Creek.
9. Also a number of names have been assigned by Europeans to conflict sites, such as the “Valley of the Dead” and “Slaughterhouse Gully” both in the Innisfail district on the Cobungra River. These names do not usually appear on Official maps.
10. Many of the Aboriginal names, but not their source or original meanings, are preserved as Parish and County names.

## End Notes

1. Previously published in the Placenames Australia Newsletter. Originally from an unpublished review of Young, Michael with Ellen & Debbie Mundy (comps) *The Aboriginal People of the Monaro*, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2000, np.
2. Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle 17.3.1910
3. Young, Michael. Op.cit. pp.173/4
4. Kooark, Quark or Quag various spelling meaning kookaburra; repetition is plural

5. Young, Michael. Op.cit. p.174
6. Previously published in Placenames Australia Newsletter.
7. Excerpt from unpublished essays c.2004
8. This project never eventuated. The notes and a shoebox of individual file cards have been donated to the East Gippsland Family History Group.
9. Pettit & Dawson typed vocabulary list in the Alfred Howitt MS Box 1044-1055 State Library of Victoria
10. Excerpt from unpublished paper for the Department of C&E in 1989 on Victorian Alpine Aborigines.
11. ibid
12. ibid