

## *The Australian National Placenames Project*

The mission of the Australian National Placenames Project is to research the origin and meaning of every placename in Australia. This is an ambitious undertaking, to extend over many decades. It will proceed by means of a number of subprojects conducted by individual researchers or small teams and centrally coordinated to ensure compatibility and lack of duplication.

The Project will include within its scope in the first instance the names of geographical features (hill, creeks, bays, headlands); habitations (towns, suburbs); other features associated with settlement and land use (stock stations, paddocks, waterholes, lines of road); and administrative divisions (states, local government areas, electorates). Historical and previously unrecorded names are also to be included. In due course coverage will extend to take in the names of undersea features within Australian territorial waters and the placenames of Australia's external territories. The names of streets and buildings lie outside the Project's scope, at least for the foreseeable future.

Both historical and linguistic interpretation will be involved. In Australia, unlike the situation in Europe, one can usually determine WHEN a place was first named in English (at least within a decade or so), often WHO named it, and in a reasonable number of cases WHY it was so named. On the other hand, the scholarly investigation of indigenous naming practices is in its infancy, and has as yet barely been reflected in material available to the interested public.

The National Placenames Project is sponsored by the Australian Academy of the Humanities. It has been planned since the foundation of that body in 1969, and the idea was keenly supported by the Foundation President, Sir Keith Hancock. A research assistant was employed in 1971 and additionally a research fellow between 1972 and 1974. There was then some uncertainty about the best way to proceed and particularly whether the project should be picked up by the University of Sydney or the University of New South Wales, and in the difficult political and economic climate of that time the project was 'rested'.

This rest period subsequently lasted for nearly a quarter of a century, but sustained efforts to keep the project from being altogether abandoned were made by Dr John Atchison of the University of New England, who had been the original research fellow, and latterly by David Blair of Macquarie University and by Bill Noble, who without the luxury of an academic position has devoted a considerable amount of his own time and resources to this cause.

It is hard to say that the outlook for the funding of major academic projects is greatly more propitious now than in 1974, but the Academy of the Humanities, under the leadership of Prof. Margaret Clunies Ross, has once again sponsored a pilot phase. Funding to the Dictionary Research Centre at Macquarie University, Sydney, for two years (1998 and 1999), has allowed me to be employed for that period, during which my brief is to work out the methodology and management structure needed for the Project proper to move full steam ahead in 2000.

At this stage everyone concerned has only a very hazy idea of the size of the task. The figure of four million names to be investigated has been bandied about over the decades (apparently first in John Atchison's J.P. Thomson Oration to the Royal Geographic Society of Australasia (Qld), in 1990), but this is the crudest of figures pulled out of a hat, based on the landmass of Australia and a ballpark figure for the density of major toponyms in Europe and their rate of replacement. The overall total is certainly unlikely to be lower than that, although for the moment the 210 000-odd names contained in

the [electronic Gazetteer](#) derived from the 1:100 000 National Topographic Map Series constitutes a challenging enough body of data.

I must stress that the Project is concerned not only with current names, but with all Australian placenames with any currency (not merely proposed). So as well as current official names we shall be collecting on the one hand names superseded by others and the names of now depopulated localities, and on the other hitherto unrecorded placenames in use in indigenous languages (of which more below). Of the likely timescale it is likewise difficult to say much with confidence, beyond the fact that we are speaking in terms of decades.

One important factor that is of great benefit to us now as compared with the 1970s is that we are able to work closely with the Committee for Geographic Names in Australia and its member bodies, the Names Boards or comparable institutions of each state and territory. The CGNA was formed in 1984 and has done a great deal of work on the technical side of toponymy, determining the forms of placenames and linking them precisely with features. It has created the electronic Gazetteer mentioned earlier, which we shall use as our foundation, whereas in the earlier pilot phase the main task of the research assistant was to transcribe placenames from printed maps onto index cards. The support of John Parker, former Chair of the CGNA and Surveyor General of Victoria, and now Registrar in charge of the new [Victorian placenaming system](#), and of Don Grant, current Chair of the CGNA and Surveyor General of New South Wales, is of inestimable value to the Project.

Their official support for and involvement in the Project is to be marked by a launch in conjunction with their annual meeting in November, at which representatives of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographic Names will also be present, so we shall be operating within the international arena. On that score, I have also experienced valuable encouragement and a fruitful exchange of ideas with names scholars in the United Kingdom when I visited in April, and more recently with ones in North America, particularly in relation to the mapping and interpretation of indigenous names. These links will be strengthened by active participation in the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, the umbrella body for names research worldwide.

What the Project seeks to do is to bolt on to the **technical** work of the CGNA the **cultural** aspect of placename studies, to interpret their history and meaning. By meaning I intend both the literal interpretation of the name if it has been composed of elements in an indigenous or imported language, and the reason why that name has been given, whether it refers to an incident in Aboriginal mythology, or was bestowed to commemorate a discoverer or patron, or was chosen because of some perceived similarity or sentimental attachment to a location overseas.

In order to carry out these aims the Project will rely on input from a very large number of people. The history and current reality of settlement patterns is so diverse that it will be necessary to break the survey down into a very large number of manageable subprojects, for which it should nevertheless be possible to develop overall guidelines based on the established procedures of systematic toponymic investigation.

A priority is to build links with indigenous people through contacts with land councils and language centres. There is a great need both to collect placename material in living Australian languages and deepen understanding of different patterns of naming, and to carry out linguistic analysis of the very numerous placenames that apparently derive from languages no longer spoken. We are very fortunate that several experts in Australian languages, including the current Australex President, have recently been carrying out investigations in this area.

We shall also be relying heavily on the involvement of local historical societies and individual historians with a detailed knowledge of the archival material relating to a particular area.

In order to move from broad outlines of toponymic practice to detail of how to apply them in the Australian context, our intention is to begin with two contrasting model studies, one in an area of early European exploration and settlement and one in a more remote locality. With funding currently covering only my own salary and associated expenses, it has not been easy to get these off the ground, but I am still trying hard. The next stage will be to use the data derived from the model studies to provide training at a national and international toponymic course to be held jointly with the CGNA and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographic Names (Asia South-East, Pacific South-West Division) in 1999, and at the Australian Linguistic Institute in 2000.

It is inevitable that with finances limited both in quantity and duration, a large part of the efforts of myself, David Blair and Bill Noble is directed to securing future funding. At the moment we are working on an application to the National Council for the Centenary of Federation's History and Education Program. Then in 1999 we shall be building on our collaboration with the CGNA to submit an application under the Australian Research Council's Strategic Partnerships with Industry (Research and Training) scheme, and also hoping for longer-term funding from 2000 onwards under the ARC's Learned Academies Program.

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