

## *The Australian National Placenames Survey*

A major long-term project to investigate the origin and meaning of every placename ever current for a geographical feature or settlement in Australia is under way at Macquarie University, Sydney. Both the pilot National Place Names Project (1998-99) and the Australian National Placenames Survey proper (from 2000) have been sponsored by the Australian Academy of the Humanities and financially supported by the Australian Research Council.

A concerted national project to research the history of Australia's placenames has been a long delayed dream. People have always been interested in the stories and ideas behind the names of places: for example, the ancient Romans debated whether the name of their city came from its legendary co-founder Romulus or from the Greek word *rhome* strength. However, it was not until the late 19th century, with the development of sound methods of etymological analysis, that such investigations began to be pursued in a systematic and scholarly way. The first volume in the Survey of English Place-Names was published in 1925, and that work continues to the present.

The tasks traditionally performed by placename researchers in Europe have been summarised by English Place-Name Society president Richard Coates as collecting spellings of placenames from ancient documents, arranging them, deducing the origin of the names, and publishing the results in book form. English placenames for the most part date back to prehistoric times, and there is rarely any written evidence that explicitly comments on the naming of a feature or settlement.

In Australia, placenames are often much more closely connected with datable events: it is very often possible to say who named a place and precisely when and why. For example, *Long Nose Point* on Jervis Bay was named by James Cook on 25 April, 1770 'on account of its figure'. *Busselton* in WA was proclaimed as a town under this name in June 1837 although the embryonic settlement had earlier been known variously as *Bussell Town* (from a prominent family of settlers), *Cattle Chosen* (from the name of their run), and *Vasse* (from the name then used for the local river).

Australia's placenames are characterised by a pattern of overlapping networks: the indigenous and the introduced. The network of placenames used by Australia's original inhabitants has been severely disrupted by European colonisation, and today it is possible to study it only in remote regions where Aboriginal language and cultural traditions have survived relatively intact. In these areas it may be seen that indigenous placenames are not primarily descriptive, like most placenames in England (*Bradford* being originally near a broad ford, *Oakton* once a settlement with a prominent oak tree), nor commemorative like so many introduced Australian placenames (such as *Darwin*, *Adelaide*, and *Sydney* from a surname, given name, and title, *Windsor* and *Glencoe* from a settlement in England and a valley in Scotland). Instead they are perceived as integral to the landscape and intimately connected with the mythology of the Dreaming. It is notable that even where Aboriginal culture is relatively intact, the meaning of a significant proportion of Aboriginal placenames is not known to those who use them.

Current official Australian placenames, as listed for example at the back of a road atlas or indeed in the Australian National Gazetteer maintained by the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping, all belong to the introduced network of names, imposed on the landscape since European settlement. This network includes many placenames of indigenous origin, although it is seldom securely established that these belonged to the features in question (traditional indigenous names referring always to features rather than settlements) within the earlier naming network. Disentangling these issues is a question of linguistic reconstruction, for

which the gathering of every early spelling variant is of great value. In the case of names assigned by Europeans without regard to indigenous traditions background information may be found in all types of historical materials, such as government papers, explorers' journals, and private letters and diaries.

When the Australian Humanities Research Council was reconstituted as the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1969, foundation president Sir Keith Hancock strongly supported the compilation of an *Australian Dictionary of Placenames* to complement the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which has been publishing volumes since 1966, and the survey of Australian English that eventually became the *Australian National Dictionary* itself. Some preliminary work was carried out in the early 1970s by Dr John Atchison of the University of New England, but due to lack of funding the project has since lain fallow for a quarter of a century.

The revived ANPS is directed by David Blair, head of the Division of Humanities at Macquarie University. Other members of the team are ANPS research fellow Flavia Hodges, ANPS research associate Susan Poetsch, and honorary research associates Dale Lehner and Bill Noble. The Survey is represented on the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia and has close links with the state and territory nomenclature authorities that are its other members. These bodies are responsible for the technical aspects of Australian toponymy i.e. determining the official names of places and their precise locations, which the ANPS seeks to complement with the cultural -- historical and linguistic -- elements.

The principal product of the Survey will be a large database, available via the Internet, linked to the registers maintained by the state and territory toponymic authorities, and giving reliable information about the history, origin and meaning of placenames, supported by detailed documentation and precise bibliographic references. This enormous project will involve the collaboration of scholars from many different disciplines -- history, linguistics, geography, and computer science.

After three years of laying the groundwork, the survey is now at the point of inviting the collaboration of members of public, in particular those carrying out investigations into local history or family history. We should like to ask all these people to be on the lookout for information about placenaming that they may come across in their investigations, and to submit it to us in a common format so that it may be added to the ANPS database.

Flavia Hodges, 2001