

# OZWORDS

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## EDITORIAL

The new online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is proving to be a very useful research tool, especially because it allows the user to conduct searches of various kinds. The online version includes the complete text of the second edition (1989) and the four volumes of 'additions' (each month about 1000 new and revised entries are added). At the Australian National University the library has a site licence, and all members of the university are able to access the dictionary from their computers. Check if your local library has access.

The National Museum was opened in Canberra early in March. It was gratifying to see the work the Centre did in providing advice for the exhibition on Australian English finally on display. Part of the exhibition has about forty Australian words displayed on individual panels, each word illustrated by a witty cartoon. The viewer can lift up the panel and find out information about each Aussie word—meaning, origin, and so on. The words on display include: bludger, larrikin, bush, fairy bread, bunyip, drop bear, alcheringa, two-up, and plonk.

The Centre published two books in March and April: *Voices of Queensland: Words from the Sunshine State* and *Who's Centric Now? The Current State of Post-Colonial Englishes*. See page 5 for more detail.

*Frederick Ludowyk*

Frederick Ludowyk  
Editor, *Ozwords*

## THE ANATOMY OF SWEARING

FREDERICK LUDOWYK

H.C. Wyld in *A History of Modern Colloquial English* (1936) writes:

There is a certain adjective, most offensive to polite ears, which plays the chief rôle in the vocabulary of large sections of the community. It seems to argue a certain poverty of linguistic resource when we find that this word is used by the same speakers to mean absolutely nothing—being placed before every noun, and often adverbially before all adjectives—and also to mean a great deal—everything indeed that is unpleasant in the highest degree.

It would come as a great surprise to the present age to realise that the word Wyld was talking about was **bloody**. The same word caused a sensation in Britain in 1914 at the first performance of G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Newspapers trumpeted: 'The biggest theatrical sensation for many years. One word in Shaw's new play will cause sensation. Mr Shaw introduces a certain forbidden word. Has the censor stepped in or will the word spread? If he does not forbid it, then anything might happen'. And thus in Act 3 Liza, 'with perfectly elegant diction', announces: 'Walk! Not bloody likely. ... I am going in a taxi'.

The word **bloody** was very popular in Australia in the nineteenth century. The prevalence of **bloody** in Australian speech was first noted in 1847 by A. Marjoribanks in *Travels in New South Wales*:

The word bloody is the favourite oath in [Australia]. One man will tell you that he married a bloody young wife, another, a bloody old one; and a bushranger will call out 'Stop, or I'll blow your bloody brains out'. I once had the curiosity to count the number of times that a bullock driver used this word in the course of a quarter of an hour, and found that he did so twenty-five times. I gave him eight hours in the day to sleep, and six to be silent, this leaving ten hours for conversation. I supposed that he had commenced at twenty and continued till seventy years of age, and found that in the course of that time he must have pronounced this disgusting word no less than 18,200,000 times.

**Bloody** became the **Australian adjective** in the 1890s: 'The *Bulletin* calls it the **Australian adjective** simply because it is more used and

used more exclusively by Australians than by any other allegedly civilised nation' (*Bulletin*, 18 August, 1894). In 1897 A. Hayward in *Along the Road to Cue* writes:

But round the push and in the bush  
They're not so strangely sensitive:  
Unmasked and bare it riots there,  
**The Great Australian Adjective.**

Even though the term was commonly used, it could cause problems in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1939 a magistrate at Newtown Court in Sydney fined a man £1 for uttering the word, although he described it as 'offensive' rather than 'indecent'. But in 1948 a Sydney judge ruled that **bloody** accompanied by an upward gesture of the thumb was neither offensive nor indecent: 'While his (the defendant's) conduct might be considered rude, it was not offensive according to an objective standard'. Bill Hornadge in *Australian Slang* (1980) reports some interesting parliamentary examples. In 1920 Hugh Mahon in the federal parliament described the British Empire as 'this **bloody** and Accursed Empire' and was dismissed from parliament on the grounds that his comment was seditious and disloyal. In 1970 Labor member C.H. Webb in the House of Representatives said, 'I never use the word **bloody** because it is unparliamentary. It is a word that I never **bloody** well use'.

Why the word **bloody** was found in the past to be so offensive is not entirely clear. Swear words usually break taboos, and at least before the nineteenth century the religious taboo was very strong. Some have argued that **bloody** is a contraction of 'by our Lady' or 'by God's blood', but the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that it began its life as a reference to the habits of loutish aristocrats or 'bloods' at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century. Thus the phrase **bloody** drunk meant 'as drunk as a blood' (cf. 'as drunk as a lord').

From the medieval period until the nineteenth century one of the strongest taboos was against using God's or Christ's names in oaths. No doubt this taboo derived from the commandment not to take the Lord's name in vain. In Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* the three young rioters are condemned for their swearing:

Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable

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# THE ANATOMY OF SWEARING

FREDERICK LUDOWYK

That it is grisly for to heere hem sweare:

Oure blisshed lordes body they to-tere  
Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym  
nought ynogh.

[Their oaths are so great and so damnable that it is grisly to hear them swear. They tear apart our Lord's blessed body. It seemed to them that the Jews had not torn him up sufficiently.]

The Pardoner gives a number of examples of these kinds of oaths, including 'by Goddes precious herte' and 'by His nayles'. Because of the taboo, a series of disguised forms was created. Thus, in place of **Jesus** we find **Jiminy**, **Gee whillikins**, **Gee whiz**, and **Jeez**. In place of **God** we find **gog** (1350s), **'sblood** (i.e. 'by God's blood', 1500s), **zounds** (i.e. 'by God's wounds', 1700s), and **golly** (1700s). There were similar taboos against swearing by the devil and hell. And so **Deuce** became a euphemism for **devil**, and **heck** a euphemism for **hell**. In the past the word **damn** was a strong taboo word. In the nineteenth century it was usually not printed, or it was given in the form **d..n**, or **darn** was substituted. Even in the Hollywood of the 1930s there was a taboo against 'profanities' that included 'God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, Hell, damn, and gawd'; thus the shock when Rhett Butler delivered his parting line in *Gone With the Wind* (1939): 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn'.

The salient point with swear words is that they must cause shock. With overuse, or with changing societal attitudes, they are gradually eroded of their power to shock. With an increasing secularisation of society, the religious taboo largely wilted, and sex and bodily parts took over. All the swear words mentioned so far appear in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1888–1928), but the following words do not: **f---**, **c---**, and **condom**. Yet the trial in England in 1960 over the publication of the unexpurgated version of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (one of the main objections being to the use of the words 'f---' and 'c---' in the novel) indicated some change of attitude. Penguin Books were acquitted of the charge of obscenity. In the second half of the twentieth century there was a freeing up in attitudes towards sexuality, and the f-word and the c-word were used in writing, and heard on film, radio, and television. Although they are still regarded by most people as the most offensive words

in the language, their increasing public use means that they are losing some of their power to shock.

Indeed, some sexually based swear words have largely lost their intensity, or have lost all connection with their original sense. For example, when the Toyota advertisements that used the word **bugger** appeared on television, there was a slight ripple of controversy, but the general consensus was that the word had lost most of its offensiveness. At the same time, however, across the Tasman, the New Zealand harness racing association was not so tolerant when a horse called *Buggerme* was sold at a yearling auction—they wanted a name change! In Britain the word **wanker** is still highly offensive, but in Australia it has lost most of its connection with the literal sense 'masturbator'. Thus, in our dictionaries we give the first (i.e. the most common in Australian English) sense: '(usually applied to a male) a person who deludes himself, thinks highly of himself and shows it in his behaviour etc.; a contemptible person'. British dictionaries label the word 'vulgar slang', whereas in our Oxford Australian dictionaries we label it simply 'colloquial'.

Even the literal sense of **wanker** ('masturbator') has lost much of its force in Australia. The *Law Society Journal* (NSW), March 2000, p. 88, reported on an interesting case in the Supreme Court of Victoria:

The Supreme Court of Victoria has held that it was not contempt of court for a solicitor, when served with an injunction, to say: 'Justice Beach has got his hand on his dick'. The judge hearing the case held that by contemporary Australian standards, to call a judge a wanker is not in contempt of court. ... Justice Cummins wound up: 'Finally I turn to whether, in the context I have defined, the words uttered by the defendant constitute contempt of court. The matter must be judged by contemporary Australian standards. It may be offensive, but it is not contempt of court, for a person to describe a judge as a wanker.'

The courts clearly recognise that changes in community standards affect the relative offensiveness of words. There was the recent case in Dubbo, in which a magistrate dismissed an offensive language charge against a young Aborigine who had used the phrase 'f---

off'. The magistrate said: 'The word f--- is extremely commonplace now. One cannot walk down the streets of any of the towns in which I sit, day or night, without hearing the word or its derivatives used as a noun, verb, adjective and indeed a term of affection'. To the courts, the issue of intention is also significant. The magistrate said: 'In short, my view is that community standards have changed and that the word in the context of this case is not offensive within the meaning of the Act. ... This is especially so where there is no evidence that the words were spoken loudly and there is an absence of evidence suggesting aggression or malice at that time'.

And context is important too. During a one-day cricket match at the SCG, Shane Warne was hit for a number of runs by Zimbabwe batsman Stuart Carlisle. Warne's comment to Carlisle—'f---ing arsey c---'—was picked up by a stump microphone and broadcast on national television. I wondered how many Australians understood the term **arsey**. **Arsey** in the sense 'lucky, especially undeservedly so' first appeared in Australian English in the 1950s. It is an alteration of the earlier 'tin arse' or 'tin arsed'. 'Tin' in this compound means 'luck', a figurative use of 'tin' in the sense 'cash', 'money'. The main objection to Warne's swearing was not the swearing in itself, but the fact that his words were broadcast on television.

A survey in Britain in 1998 found the four most offensive words to be **c---**, **motherf-----**, **f---**, and **wanker**. The term **nigger** was rated eleventh and the term **Paki** fifteenth. The survey was repeated in 2000, and while the first four candidates were identical, **nigger** had jumped to fifth most offensive and **Paki** to tenth. A similar survey was conducted in New Zealand in 1993, and the first three placings were identical with the British evidence. **Nigger** was not included in the 1993 survey, but it was included when the survey was repeated in 1999, and this time **nigger** was placed as the third most offensive word, ahead of **f---**.

This indicates that we are in a transitional period. As the sexually based swear words lose their intensity they are being replaced by racially based terms. Most of these terms have been in the language for a very long time. The 1600s produced **Blackamoor**, **Ethiop**, and **Tartar**. The 1800s produced **Kaffir**, **Nigger**, **Coon**, and **Frenchy**. The first half



# THE ANATOMY OF SWEARING

FREDERICK LUDOWYK

of the twentieth century produced **Kike**, **Hun**, **Chink**, **Wop**, **Boche**, **Fritz**, **Jerry**, **Kraut**, **Pom**, **Wog**, **Spic**, **Eyette**, **Nip**, and **Gook**. In Australian English **Pom** first appears in 1912, **Abo** in 1906, and **boong** in 1924. All these terms were derogatory insults when they first appeared, but they were not taboo terms. Similarly, sexually and bodily explicit terms are found in the early literature, but as long as there was no taboo against referring to sexuality and to bodily functions, they were not true swear words.

References to God in oaths were taboo because of the religious dictate that the Lord's name should not be taken in vain. References to sexuality and bodily functions became taboo when society became deeply neurotic about these activities. The taboo against racial slurs

arose with changes in social attitudes towards the end of the twentieth century. In 2000, Queensland Aborigine Stephen Hagan sought compensation for 'hurt feelings' over the Toowoomba football grandstand named after Edwin 'Nigger' Brown. Brown was a white rugby player who was on the 1921–22 Australian tour of Britain, and it is believed that he gained the nickname 'Nigger' because he was very fair and had the surname 'Brown'. However, the judge ruled that the name did not contravene Australia's racial discrimination laws. Again in 2000 a former director of the Central Land Council and prospective Labor Party candidate, Tracker Tilmouth, caused a furore when he said: 'The Labor Party up here is a strange beast. It likes pet niggers and I'm counted as a pet nigger. I'm

allowed to mow the lawns, but I'm not allowed on the verandah'. He was severely castigated by white politicians for using such inflammatory language. When these two incidents were reported in the British *Guardian* newspaper, the reporter concluded: 'The absence of Aborigines at the apex of Australian society underlines that it is more commonly white judges and white politicians who determine when "nigger" is nice and when it is nasty'.

These incidents demonstrate how racist language has taken centre stage in the area of taboo. In keeping with this trend, recently published dictionaries still provide users with warnings about the c- and f-words, but the 'offensive' label is now largely applied in Australia to offensive or potentially offensive racial terms.

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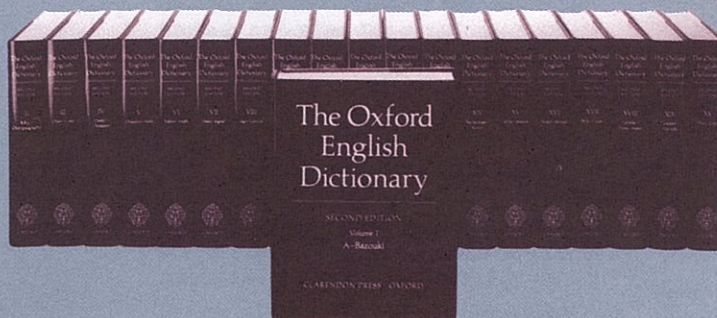
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**We welcome readers' comments on their recent observations of Australian usage, both positive and negative, and their queries, particularly those not easily answerable from the standard reference books.**

## MIGLOO

I wonder if sometime you could comment in *Ozwords* on 'migloo', which I have come across twice recently, once in the novel *Hard Yards* by Melissa Lucashenko and once in a review article in the *Australian Book Review* (November 2000). From the contexts I gather it is a term used by (urban?) Aborigines to refer to non-indigenous Australians, perhaps comparable to the black American term 'honky' for a white person.

Eric Marsh  
Qld

*Migloo* is used mainly in Queensland and northern New South Wales. It means 'white person' and comes from the Mayi-Kutuna language of the Leichhardt River area of north Queensland where it meant 'a person'. It was borrowed into other Aboriginal languages of this area, and then found its way into Aboriginal English in which it could be comparable to 'honky'. Lucashenko also uses it in the abbreviated form *mig*. In Northern Territory Aboriginal English the word *balanda* is used for 'white person'. This is a corruption of *Hollander* (i.e. 'Dutch'), and was borrowed from the Macassaree who crewed fishing boats in the area from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Aboriginal English of south-eastern Australia *gubba* is used for 'white person', and this is probably an alteration of 'government'. Ed.

## MEDAL

There was quite a lot of comment during the Sydney Olympics on the use of 'medal' as a verb—e.g. an athlete 'medalled' in an event. Is this acceptable?

J. Simpson  
NSW

We sometimes jokingly make the point that 'there is no noun that cannot be verbed'. But we were surprised to note the recent fuss over the verb *to medal*, as if it had been invented by sports commentators solely for the Sydney Olympics. The fussers are obviously not using our dictionaries! This verbal sense of *medal* first appeared in the 1997 edition of the Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary. We first noticed this verbal use of *medal* during the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. It is quite acceptable. Ed.

## NICKNAME

Where does the 'nick' in 'nickname' come from? Is it 'nick' in the sense 'to cut'?

FP  
NT

The *nick* in *nickname* is not a *nick* at all. It is more of an *ick*. The word *nickname* was

originally *eke name*, meaning 'also name'. In Middle English, the *n* of the indefinite article *an* was frequently transferred to a following word beginning with a vowel. Thus *an eke name* became a *neke name*, hence *nickname*. The circa-1440 English-Latin Lexicon, *Promptorium parvulorum ... lexicon Anglo-Latinum princeps*, shows the transition taking place: 'Neke name, or eke name, agnomen'. Another example is a *newt*, originally *an ewt*. The reverse of this process also occurred, the initial *n* of a word being drawn backwards into the indefinite article. Thus, a *nadder* became *an adder*, a *napron* became *an apron*, a *naitchbone* became *an aitchbone*, a *numpire* became *an umpire*, and a *nauger* became *an auger*. Ed.

## RACKET

I recently saw an advertisement for 'tennis rackets'. I thought the usual spelling was 'tennis racquet'.

Jim Clark  
WA

*Racket* is the original spelling of the word in Britain and dates back to the early sixteenth century. The Scottish poet Dunbar in his *Poems* (1500–20) writes of 'Sa mony rakkettis'. The form *racquet* was also in use, but infrequently. Thus, in 1574, Thomas Newton writes of 'Striking and receaving the balles with a racquet'. Both forms of the word derive from the sixteenth-century French *raquette* and are endorsed by the Oxford English dictionaries, with *racket* given as first choice in the British dictionaries.

Internet searches are instructive here. A search on <+racket +tennis> gives 77 004 hits, while <+racquet +tennis> gives 90 333. A search on <tennis racquet> gives 50 566, while <tennis racket> gives 41 802. This indicates that throughout the world the spelling *racquet* is favoured, but not by a great majority. But a comparison of United Kingdom and Australian usage is instructive. On Australian Internet sites the combination <+racquet +tennis> produces 1091 hits, whereas the combination <+racket +tennis> produces 302 hits. Similarly, <tennis racquet> appears on 210 Australian sites and <tennis racket> on 93. The spelling *racquet* is clearly preferred in Australia. In the United Kingdom, however, the figures are very different. The combination <+racket +tennis> appears on 10 440 sites, while <+racquet +tennis> appears on only 798. The combination <tennis racket> appears on 470 UK sites, but <tennis racquet> on only 170. Ed.

## RESUME

It was originally *résumé*, then *resumé*, but now increasingly *resume*. What is the

correct spelling for this word meaning curriculum vitae?

Judy  
SA

The word first appears in English in 1804 and it is spelt *resumé*, although in later nineteenth-century examples the spelling is *résumé* (the correct French form). In the twentieth century all three spellings are used. The Australian Oxford Dictionary (1999) gives *resumé* as the preferred spelling (although it allows the other two as well) for two reasons. First, it reflects the most common pronunciation of the word in Australian English (/rez-uh-may/). Secondly, the accent on the final *e* usefully distinguishes the word from *resume* in the sense 'begin again'. By the bye, *resumé* also means 'a summary'. The sense 'curriculum vitae' was originally American, but has gained currency in Australia of late. Ed.

## CATS AND DOGS

What is the origin of the saying 'It's raining cats and dogs'? This has always been puzzling to me. Why cats and dogs?

CTC

Connecticut, USA

Nobody knows. There are many theories, however, none of them at all convincing. One of these is that in medieval England the streets were so deplorable that a heavy storm of rain could create a sort of river in them and drown all the cats and dogs. When the storm had passed the local yokels would see all the feline and canine corpses and assume that they had come down in the last shower. Really! Brewer in his *Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* argues that in northern mythology the cat was believed to have great influence on the weather. 'Witches that rode on storms were said to assume the form of cats'. The dog, says Brewer, symbolises the wind and together with the wolf was an attendant on Odin, the god of storms. 'Thus cat may be taken as a symbol of pouring rain, and dog of the strong gusts of wind accompanying a rainstorm'. Speciously argued, methinks. My favourite explanation (which the explainers put forward quite seriously) is that in the Middle Ages all the houses had roofs of thatch and the cats and dogs were wont to sleep on the thatch for warmth. (How in heaven's name did the dogs get up there?) When it rained heavily, the cats and dogs slid off the slippery thatch and fell to the street below. 'Looke there, Alys,' says husband John, 'it be raining cats and dogs, bah goom!' Jonathan Swift is believed to be the first to record the saying. In his *Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversation* (1738) he has the following: 'I know Sir John will go, though he was sure it would rain cats and dogs'. Perhaps Swift invented the aphorism as a striking way of saying 'It is raining very heavily indeed'. Ed.



## NEW BOOKS

*Voices of Queensland: Words from the Sunshine State*, edited by Julia Robinson at the Centre, was published in March. The chapter 'Queensland Aboriginal Words in Australian English' lists 53 words that were borrowed into Australian English from 22 Queensland Aboriginal languages. This includes the word **kangaroo**, which was recorded in the journals of James Cook and Joseph Banks when the *Endeavour* was beached in 1770 for repairs at the mouth of what was to be named the Endeavour River, the site of present-day Cooktown. And it also includes such common colloquial Australian terms as **bung** and **yakka** from the Yagara language of the Brisbane region. These became part of nineteenth-century Australian pidgin English, and then moved into standard Australian English. The chapter 'The Good Life' includes such terms as **big lunch**, **cane toad racing**, **cheerio**, **crawchie**, **cricko**, **de-nutting**, **duchess**, **goose club**, **lowset**, **meter maid**, **pumpkin scone**, **squatter's chair**, **stinger season**, and **Windsor sausage**. The chapter 'Behind the Scenery: People, Politics and Perceptions' includes such terms as **bevan**, **Bjelkemander**, **blue nurse**, **do a Joh**, **mexican**, **Normanton cocktail**, **Queen Street cockie**, **schoolie**, **Shreddergate**, and **white shoe brigade**. And there are chapters on the outback, the sugar industry, and the Kayardild Aboriginal language of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

*Who's Centric Now? The Present State of Post-Colonial Englishes*, edited by Bruce Moore, was published in April. These are the papers from the conference of the same name that was held at the Australian National University at the end of 1999.

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Our next book on regional Australian English will deal with the language of South Australia. This is an especially rich area of research: Australian English borrowed words from South Australian Aboriginal languages, there are the strong Cornish and German influences, and there are the local coinages such as **stobie pole**, **floater**, and **fritz**. If any South Australians have information on any of these matters we would be pleased to hear from you. We would also be grateful if any of our South Australian subscribers would be prepared to send us copies of local newspapers. We have good access to mainstream newspapers such as the *Advertiser*, but find it difficult to get hold of local and country newspapers in hard copy. Such newspapers are often a good source for evidence of regionalisms.

# FROM THE CENTRE

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL  
DICTIONARY CENTRE

The Australian National Dictionary Centre is jointly funded by Oxford University Press Australia and the Australian National University to research all aspects of Australian English and to publish Australian dictionaries and other works.

## PIFF

This is a word that we have been trying to track down. On 26 August 1999 the following passage appeared in the *Warrnambool Standard*: 'One of the south-west's favorite trios will be returning to Warrnambool this week to ask the perennial question "have you piffed one lately?" Yes, it's the Piffen Yonnies, back from the pursuit of fame and fortune in Melbourne to perform before a home-town audience at the Criterion Hotel on Saturday night'. At the Piffen Yonnies website they explain that 'piffing yonnies' is 'a colloquial term used for throwing or hurling rocks or stones'. **Yonnie**, a Victorian word for 'a small stone', is well attested from the 1940s, but we have no records of the verb to **piff**. There is other evidence on the Internet. A Melbourne person writes: 'Picking up the water bottles, he piffed them into and at the audience'. A Geelong person writes: 'One guy at the Testeagles who was crowd surfing seemed to have a good idea—he'd strapped a giant inflatable cushion to his back, so when he got piffed over the front of the crowd, he just landed on the cushion'. An Australian yachtsman writes (it is not clear which state he comes from): 'Felix also came back with us and we invited him out to the boat for a coca cola which he really enjoyed although we were a little dismayed when he piffed the can over the side when he was finished'. I tested the word on talkback radio with James Valentine on 2BL in Sydney, and the only people who professed to know it were Victorians. I also tested it at the Queenscliff Carnival of Words, and a number of people in the audience knew it. Many Victorians recalled the fact that they piffed yonnies when they were young. Is it a Victorian word? And does anyone have printed evidence of the word?

## 'ARRY'S GATORS

This supposedly Australian term found its way into Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional Usage*. He obtained the term from Edwin Morrisby in 1958. It is defined as 'thank you', and explained as a corruption of Japanese **arrigato**. Sidney Baker includes the variant '**Arry's gaiters**' in the 1966 edition of *The Australian Language*, and claims that it arose during the Korean War. Some talkback callers, however, attributed it to the Second World War. We have no records of the term, and would be grateful if anyone could guide us to printed evidence of it.

## MUNGO

In the midst of the debate over the preamble to the Australian constitution, the following headline appeared in the *Canberra Times* (1999): 'Please, Mr Howard, don't let a mungo write the preamble!' Again in the *Canberra Times* (1999): 'Sadly for some of the men termed "mungos" by those in rival football codes, they are apparently out of touch with what is currently acknowledged as acceptable conduct'. Internet sites again prove useful. An Aussie Rules Collingwood supporters' site has this message: 'Great to see everyone backing the Black and Whites! I live in Rugby League "Mungo" country—"2 men pushing 3 men's heads up 4 men's backsides" and generally chucking the ball in the wrong direction. Go Collingwood—Aussie Rules Rules!' A scientist discussing the 60 000 year old Mungo 3 skeleton at Willandra Lakes writes: 'Nor was he clasping a rugby league ball. For some time now, Australian rugby league players have been unkindly dubbed mungoes. Clearly, we have proof now that this is a slur to Mungo 3'. So a **mungo** appears to be a rugby league player. And certainly not a rugby union player, as spelt out in this passage from the *Australian* (2000): 'For the 50 minutes of the Murrayfield [rugby union] test on Saturday night, I could have sworn I was watching a game of rugby league. Wallabies five-eighth Rod Kafer would get the ball, hop on the spot, and turn the ball back inside. Classic "mungoes" stuff'. We assume that this is a corruption of **mongrel**, but would be glad to hear of any other explanation. Again, most of our evidence is from the late 1990s, and we are looking for earlier printed evidence.

BRUCE MOORE  
DIRECTOR



# PLACENAMES IN AUSTRALIA

DAVID BLAIR

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 *rhōmē* 'strength'. However, it was not until the late nineteenth 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 Australian National Placenames Survey 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; that is, 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 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.

At present the data should be sent to us electronically using a template supplied by us; later in the year we hope to offer the option of entering it directly over the Internet. If you are interested, however tentatively, in contributing to the work of the Survey, please get in touch with Susan Poetsch (email <spoetsch@hmn.mq.edu.au>; Department of English, Macquarie University, NSW, 2109). If you would prefer just to be kept informed of the work of the ANPS by means of the free quarterly Bulletin, please contact editor Bill Noble (email <bnoble@hmn.mq.edu.au>; 11 Ferguson Avenue, Hazelbrook, NSW, 2779).





The *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographers in the United Kingdom are working on the third edition of the dictionary. This is a massive undertaking, with a projected completion date of 2010. They have been working on the letter M, and came across a problem with the etymology of the Australian word **mia-mia**. A **mia-mia** is 'a temporary shelter of the Aborigines, usually a simple frame of branches covered with bark, leaves, or grass'. It is also used in Australian English to describe 'a temporary shelter erected by a traveller': 1855 'We received a volley of shots from a sort of mia-mia on the side of the road' (G.H. Wathen, *Golden Colony*, p. 153); 1924 'Here I erected a *mia-mia*, which consists of a pole placed horizontally between two trees with long dried strips of bark from the red gum or eucalyptus tree resting against it. These slabs are shifted from one side of the pole to the other in accordance with the direction from which the wind is blowing' (A.B. Peirce, *Knocking About*, p. 13).

Aboriginal peoples in different parts of Australia had different words for such a shelter, and a number of these words were borrowed into Australian English. Soon after settlement at Sydney the word **gunyah** was borrowed from Dharuk (it is first recorded in 1803). With settlement in Queensland, the word **humpy** was borrowed from the Yagara language of the Brisbane region (it is first recorded in 1846). In South Australia the word **wurley** was borrowed from the Gaurna language (it is first recorded in 1839).

So where does **mia-mia** come from? In the *Australian National Dictionary* (1988) we are told that it comes from Wathawurung and Wuywurung. Wathawurung was the language spoken on the western side of Port Phillip Bay, including the present city of Geelong and the town of Bacchus Marsh, and extending inland probably as far as the city of Ballarat. Wuywurung was the language spoken in the area of present-day Melbourne, and extending as far north as Seymour, and to the north of Westernport, and from the Goulburn River across to Bendigo. However, in *Australian Aboriginal Words in English* (1990), a book that also emanates from the Australian National Dictionary Centre, we are told: 'Although this word was much used in Victoria (the earliest Victorian instance is 1839) it appears to have originated as *maya* or *maya-maya* in

Nyungar, the language of the Perth-Albany region'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographers were puzzled by this change, and sent us a friendly 'please explain'.

The earliest evidence for the word **mia** is from Nyungar in Western Australia. R.M. Lyons, 'A Glance at the Manners, and Language of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia' (*Perth Gazette*, 13 April, 1833) gives: 'Mya, a house. ... The term is applied indiscriminately to a small piece of bark of the Melaleuca made to hold small fishes, and frogs; or to a shelter made from small sticks, rudely stuck into the ground, and covered, with large pieces of the same material'. There is much later evidence of this form from Western Australia in word lists of the Nyungar language, but the reduplicated form (i.e. **mia-mia**) appears in only one late-nineteenth century source. Moreover, the Western Australian word does not appear in Australian English contexts until the twentieth century. Katharine Susannah Prichard uses **miah** in *Coonardoo* (1929) and other novels, and Daisy Bates uses **mia** in *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938). A recent article in the Western Australian magazine *Landscape* (Winter 1998) continues to use the non-reduplicated form: 'The party is pictured with their digging sticks at the site of a mia—a traditional Aboriginal shelter'.

In the Victorian records the word is variously spelt, often with a final m, and most commonly in the reduplicated form: **mai-mai**, **miam-miam**, **myam-myam**, **mya-mya**, etc. Jane Simpson recently alerted us to the fact that the earliest evidence for the word in Victoria is in the journal of George Augustus Robinson on 29 December 1836 (in N.J.B. Plomley, ed., *Weep in Silence: A History of the Flinders Island Aboriginal Settlement*, Hobart, 1987). Robinson gives **miam miam** for 'house' in the language of the 'Port Phillip Aborigines'. Another Aboriginal vocabulary from the area, C.J. Griffith's 'A Glossary of a Few Native Words in the Language of the Port Philip Corio-Weirabee-Barrbul Tribes' (1840, Latrobe Library manuscript), gives the form **mimi**. But the word does not appear in other collections of the vocabulary of the Wathawurung and Wuywurung peoples. And yet from 1837 it appears in many Victorian newspapers, journals, and books. It was a term, it seems, known to all

people in the new settlements of Melbourne and Geelong.

Here are some examples (in the first quotation, the speaker is the escaped convict William Buckley, who lived among the Wathawurung for 32 years): 1837 'The children of the tribe were very fond of me and often came to sleep in my miamiam' (*Historical Records of Victoria*, 2A, p. 182); 1838 'Are you sure then the blacks have not done anything which may be considered in the light of an improvement, and which would by the law of man give them the priority of right?' 'Nothing; unless you include their meam-meams or gooneahs under that head' (*Port Phillip Gazette*, 10 November); 1839 'The poor fellows retired to their "Myam Myams" (native huts) with additional confidence in their protectors' (*Historical Records of Victoria*, 2B, p. 451); 1840 'They walked in regular order, each carrying his spear, & a cockatoo's feather in his head; the women and children followed, & made their miam miams close to the house' (*Clyde Company Papers*, vol. 2, p. 400).

The editors of *Australian Aboriginal Words in English* came to the conclusion that **mia-mia** must have originated in Western Australia, and was brought across to Victoria by non-indigenous people. B.J. Blake, I.D. Clark, and S.H. Krishna-Pillay in their recent study 'Wathawurung: The Language of the Geelong-Ballarat Area (in *Wathawurung and the Colac Language of Southern Victoria*, ed. B.J. Blake, 1998) concluded that where it appears in the Victorian vocabulary of C.J. Griffith, it is in fact the Western Australian word borrowed via English.

The basic question is whether this is credible. A small penal settlement was established in southern Western Australia at what was to become Albany in 1826, and settlement on the Swan River began in 1829. In Victoria, settlement at Port Phillip began in 1835. It is most unlikely that these early settlers could have borrowed the word from Nyungar, taken it to Port Phillip, and passed it on to the local Aborigines in such a short time (recall that **miam miam** occurs in an 1836 word list). But from early in the nineteenth century, whalers and sealers moved regularly along the southern coast of Australia, from Western Australia to Victoria and Tasmania, and if there is any credibility in the story that **mia-mia**



comes from Western Australia, it is only these whalers and sealers who could have passed it on.

But there are further problems with the Western Australian story. In addition to the fact that in Western Australia the reduplicated form appears only in one late example, in none of the Western Australian examples is there the final *m* that is so common in the Victorian examples. Moreover, why would a group of Victorian Aborigines have the need for a new word to describe an object they had

no doubt used, and already had a word for, for thousands of years? English has borrowed or coined many words for different kinds of houses—mansion, bungalow, villa, cottage, etc.—but the basic word ‘house’ has remained rock solid. The word has been in the language since Germanic times (the same word occurs in German, Dutch, Swedish, etc.), and probably goes back to Indo-European times.

The similarity between the Western Australian *mia* and the Victorian *mia-mia*

is certainly interesting, but our current judgment is that is probably just a coincidence. Our advice to the *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographers is that in the light of our present knowledge they should retain the etymology as given in the *Australian National Dictionary*.

[Thanks to Jane Simpson and David Nash for help with our work on *mia-mia*—though they would not necessarily agree with our conclusions.]

## OZWORDS COMPETITIONS

### Ozwords Competition No. 14: results

Extracting satire from nursery rhymes, which is what this competition was all about, seemed to have been too hard for many entrants. Only two entrants obeyed my instruction about word length, so the judging was based solely on the quality of the entries.

Second prize (books worth \$50 from the OUP catalogue): **Judy Ferguson**, SA, for the following:

*Little Jack Horner  
Sat in the corner  
Eating a Christmas pie.  
He put in his thumb  
And pulled out a plum  
And said, 'What a good boy am I!'*

There can be no doubt that the Jack Horner of this rhyme is our current prime minister, John Howard. After all, the initials are identical and Jack is the diminutive of John. He sits in his corner in Canberra with the GST ‘pie’ on his lap, but it is no use to him until he pulls out the ‘plum’, a Ms Meg Lees, who kindly makes the whole business easier for him by giving her provisional support to his ‘pie’. Now, of course, he takes full credit for it despite the efforts of the now forgotten cook, John Hewson, who uncannily also has Jack Horner’s initials! Sadly, however, not all of us agree with his self-congratulatory remarks at the end of the rhyme. The use of the word ‘Christmas’ to describe the pie can only refer to the ‘gift’ Australian taxpayers have contributed to government revenue through this tax.

First prize (books worth \$100 from the OUP catalogue): **Betty Birsks**, Qld, for the following:

*Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye  
Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.  
When the pie was opened the birds began  
to sing,  
Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before  
the king!*

This is not the song of a joyous, melodious feast, but a sour political satire. It is the Queensland Coalition’s sardonic slant on recent events in the Sunshine State. The ‘song of sixpence’ is a contemptuous reference to the alleged roting of the electoral rolls by ALP members—not for a grandiose gerrymander as conducted until 1989, but for petty internal power plays between the factions of the ALP. Ditto ‘a pocket full of rye’: careers, a party, perhaps

a federal election are put at risk by another petty action, a miserly \$500 allegedly given in a brown paper bag to the Democrats. The ‘twenty-four blackbirds’ are other ALP members, ordinary foot soldiers, baked into (i.e. trapped in) the pie (i.e. the cage) of AWU factionalism. When the pie is opened to public gaze by the CJC Shepherdson Enquiry, the twenty-four ALP members ‘sing like birds’—to use a criminal slang expression. The last two lines of the rhyme are a triumphant chortle by the Coalition, as they anticipate the ‘dainty dish’ of an ALP collapse, which they can set before King Johnny Howard as he approaches the next election.

Ed.

### Ozwords Competition No. 15

Dr Samuel Johnson who published his famous dictionary in 1755 described the lexicographer as ‘a harmless drudge’. Yet the writing of dictionaries can be fun. In this month’s competition we intend to have some fun with the business of writing dictionary entries.

Dictionary entries are sometimes unintentionally funny as when the 1972 *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* defined **noose** as ‘a snare or bond generally, esp. hanging or marriage’. Dictionary entries sometimes reflect the wit of their makers as when Harry Orsman in his 1979 *Heinemann New Zealand Dictionary* defined **wanker** as ‘a person given to unproductive activity’, a definition that enabled one defendant to escape an obscene language charge in the New Zealand courts. The prize for the most outrageous dictionary entry ever undoubtedly goes to Dr Johnson. During his editing of the dictionary, his patron withdrew his funding of the project. When the dictionary finally appeared, Johnson’s entry for ‘patron’ read as follows: ‘**patron**: one who countenances, supports, or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery’.

For this competition choose one of the following terms, and write your own subversive dictionary definition of it:

- economic rationalism
- synchronised swimming
- keep the bastards honest
- please explain

The most wittily subversive lexicographer wins.

Ed.

### Entries close 31 July 2001.

Entries sent by email should also contain a snail mail address.

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