

# THE ABORIGINAL INFLUENCE ON AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

When people arrive in Australia from overseas, whether as migrants or tourists, they are faced with a plethora of Aboriginal place-names and words, that they are unsure how to even pronounce, let alone know what they mean.

There is of course no problem with the names of our capital cities, which are commonly named after previously notable upper-class Britishers. The one exception to this is Canberra, our national capital, which is an Aboriginal word, meaning quite appropriately, 'Meeting Place'. However, there are on the other hand, many other suburbs and towns in Australia, with rather tongue-twisting Aboriginal names like Woolloomooloo, Wandiligong, Murrumbidgee or Briagolong.

Overseas arrivals do however have some warning of what is in store, because of the world-wide fascination that exists for our unique Australian wildlife. Virtually nobody arrives here without having heard Aboriginal words like Kangaroo, Emu, Cockatoo, Dingo, Wombat and Koala.

Similarly, most new arrivals are already well acquainted with a range of other Aboriginal words like Didgeridoo, Corroboree, Boomerang and Woomera. The plain fact is that both our traditional indigenous culture and our indigenous wildlife are Australia's greatest tourist attractions.

It is interesting though, that when you travel around, you very rarely see an Aboriginal placename that includes an explanation of what the name means. Then again, this perhaps might be for the best, because many Aboriginal place-names can often be rather dubious or risqué jokes.

For instance, many years ago I was driving along near Bendigo with Uncle Kevin Atkinson, a Senior Aboriginal Elder. As we went through a little place called Gournong, Kevin chuckled to himself, so I asked him what was so amusing. Kevin then told me that Gournong actually meant 'stinks like poop'. I found this rather interesting, because I already knew that the name of our local 'Koonung' creek had a similar meaning. I had also been previously told by an Elder, Uncle Eric Onus, that his brother, Bill Onus, had in the early 1950's given Melbourne's Moomba Festival its name. Eric said that Moomba basically meant: 'You're talking out of your bum'.

Kevin also told me on another occasion when we were in Mildura, that the name of the town meant 'Flies in the eyes.' I was immediately inclined to believe him, based solely on my own personal experience there. So, from this it is quite apparent, that while some Aboriginal place-names may be jocular in nature, they can also be valid observations of an aspect of that area.

For instance, down in South Gippsland where I have a few relatives, I know that the name of the town Korumburra, means 'March Flies'. Like Canberra, the name of the fly-speck town of Jumbunna, also means 'Meeting Place', while Kooweerup means 'Many Blackfish'. As an adjunct to this, it is also something of a standing joke in South Gippsland, that Wonthaggi means 'You've missed the turnoff to Phillip Island'.

All these strange new Australian place-names make it hard enough for tourists or new arrivals, but they also have to contend with the vagaries of Australian English, in particular, the way in which Aboriginal words and concepts have been adopted into our everyday language. There is perhaps no better way of illustrating this, than in the words of our national song 'Waltzing Matilda'.

I mean, first you have to explain to a new arrival what a Swagman is, and that their swag is called Matilda. Then the analogy of them itinerantly waltzing it around, before you even try to explain the Aboriginal words used in the song. How is a newcomer supposed to have the faintest clue of what a billabong is that the jolly swagman happens to have camped by, under a Coolibah tree? Then, down comes a Jumbuk to drink at the billabong and the swagman stuffs it into his 'tucker-bag'.

Here is where the average Australian finds it even more difficult. Some Aboriginal words like Jumbuk, which of course means sheep, and Yakka, which means hard work, have become so ingrained into Australian English that we don't even think of the semantic origins of the words. So, as an example, let's think about the origins of the word 'Jumbuk', which Banjo Patterson immortalised in our national song.

Every Australian knows that Jumbuk is the Aboriginal word for sheep, but there were no sheep in Australia until 1788, so what is the actual literal meaning of Jumbuk? Well, it so happens that Aboriginal people were very keen weather observers, and in the Yass area where Banjo Patterson lived, those high-up, little white dumpling-like cloudlets, with the posh scientific name of 'Alto-Cumulus', were called 'Jumbuk'.

As soon as you know this, you immediately have the indelible image of some Aboriginal people up Yass way, when they first saw a flock of sheep. You can see one of them laughing, pointing and saying: 'Look at all the little white clouds', and of course the name stuck because it was so apt.