

HOW THE YARRA GOT NAMED

The story of how Melbourne's river was named 'Yarra' begins in May 1835, when John Batman made his historic journey to Port Phillip, pretending to buy Aboriginal land. Batman took seven Aboriginal men from Sydney with him as guides and interpreters and although he scarcely mentions them in his diary, they did their job admirably. Using their Songline navigational knowledge, they made contact with the Woiwurung people and arranged the meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough, on 6th June 1835.

After this bogus 'treaty' meeting, Batman went back to Tasmania with two of the Sydney men, Stewart and Bulbalong, leaving the other five Sydney men, his three fellow colonists and a whaleboat at Geelong.

Two months later the surveyor in the Port Phillip Syndicate, John Wedge, left Tasmania, bringing Stewart and Bulbalong back as guides. The three men were dropped off at Geelong on 7th August 1835. By this time, two local Wathurong men, Joanjoan and Diabering, had, in company with the colonist Thompson, become avid sailors and fisherman from the whaleboat.

Wedge surveyed the Geelong area for four weeks, initially being ferried around in the boat by Thompson, Joanjoan and Diabering. He was then accompanied on foot by William Buckley the escaped convict. Buckley had come into the camp on 6th July 1835, thirty-two years after his escape at Sorrento. Thompson and the two Geelong men then sailed Wedge and the two Sydney men to Melbourne, arriving on 2nd September 1835. Thompson, Joanjoan and Diabering then returned to Geelong with the boat, whilst Stewart and Bulbalong accompanied Wedge on his survey work around Melbourne for the next fortnight.

However, when the boat had first come up the freshwater river on 2nd September 1835, as it approached the Queen Street falls, one of the two Sydney men exclaimed Yarra! Yarra! This meant 'waterfall' in their Sydney tongue, but Wedge misunderstood and thought he was being told the local name of the river.

Wedge was probably a bit distracted, because John Pascoe Fawkner's ship the Enterprise was already moored at the falls. Wedge subsequently got into an argument with the leader of the party, Captain Lancey, saying they had no right to be there on the land claimed by Batman. Wedge then gave Lancey a written order to leave. Lancey handed the paper back to Wedge and informed him that he '*...might want it for some necessary occasion, which would be the full worth of such a notice*'. In the flowery language of the day, Lancey was of course telling Wedge to wipe his bum with it.

This clearly demonstrated the rivalry and ill-will between Batman and Fawkner which continued unabated for the rest of their lives. Batman died in 1839, but for the following

twenty years Fawcner continued to give public lectures on what a liar and degenerate Batman was.

However back in 1835 Wedge on 13th September formally recorded the name of the river as being 'Yarra', and since then myths have become entrenched around the meaning of the name, making it difficult to correct. This started when it was wrongly assumed that the natives with Wedge were local Woiwurrung people. Building on this, it was then assumed that 'Yarra' was a Woiwurung word. It is, but Yarra in Woiwurung means 'hair' and Yarra-Yarra means 'fur'. These words have the same meaning in Wathurong and Boonwurrung.

The many Kulin language words with 'yarra' in them have since been conveniently ignored. All these words refer to specific types of hair such as eyebrows, eyelashes, beards, moustaches, pubic hair and even baldness.

The situation was further confused nearly a hundred years later by Hugh McCrae, the grandson of Georgiana McCrae, an early settler on the Mornington Peninsula. In 1932 Hugh edited his grandmother's Boonwurrung language notes from the 1840's, in which one word with 'yarra' in it, referred to tidal flows. Hugh noted that he thought Yarra meant 'flowing' and the idea stuck. One Boonwurung word about tidal flow has therefore been used to erroneously claim that Yarra-Yarra meant 'ever-flowing' in Woiwurrung, when it in fact means 'fur'.

Many people therefore now believe that Yarra was the original name of the river and that the local people were the 'Yarra-Yarra Tribe'. This is in a sense true, because tribes in the first instance refer to themselves as belonging to a river catchment area. However the Woiwurrung name of the river was Birrarung not Yarra.

This misconception about the meaning of the word Yarra continues to this day, despite Wedge having later publicly corrected his mistake. In correspondence to Batman's biographer, John Bonwick on 23rd February 1856, Wedge wrote that after finishing his survey work in Melbourne in September 1835, he and the two Sydney men began walking back to Geelong. On reaching the ford at the Werribee River, the Sydney men again pointed to the rapids and said 'Yarra'.

Wedge wrote that it was then he realised he had been mistaken in the name of the river, but it was already too late. Many people still today erroneously believe that Yarra is the original name, and means ever-flowing.