

THE NAMING OF THE YARRA IN SEPTEMBER 1835

When beginning this column two years ago, the Diary Editors suggested the very apt name of 'Birrarrung Stories'. Birrarrung is of course the original Woiwurung name for the Yarra, meaning 'river of mists and shadows'.

A previous article briefly recounted how our river got the name 'Yarra', but it is worth giving a little more detail. The full story actually illustrates how by constant repetition, myths can become regarded as historical facts.

The story begins in May 1835, when John Batman made his historic journey to Port Phillip. He brought with him seven Sydney Blacks, who were to act as guides and interpreters. Although Batman scarcely mentions them in his diary, the Sydney men did their required job. They made contact with the Woiwurung people and organised the historic meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough.

Straight after this meeting on 8th June 1835 Batman went back to Tasmania. He left five of the seven Sydney Blacks at Geelong, together with the other three colonists in his party. The surveyor in the Port Phillip Syndicate John Wedge then came over from Tasmania and was dropped off at Geelong on 7th August 1835.

Wedge surveyed there for four weeks and was accompanied by William Buckley the escaped convict, who had come into the camp on 6th July 1835. After this the five Sydney men rowed Wedge to Melbourne in a whaleboat, arriving there on 2nd September 1835. Three of the Sydney men then returned to Geelong with the boat, whilst the other two accompanied Wedge on his survey work.

Back on 2nd September though, as the boat came up the river and approached the Queen Street falls, the two Sydney men who were to remain with Wedge exclaimed Yarra! Yarra! This meant 'waterfall' in their Sydney tongue, but Wedge misunderstood. He thought they were telling him it was the name of the river.

Wedge was at that time probably a bit distracted, because John Pascoe Fawkner's ship the Enterprise, with a party led by Captain Lancey, was already moored at the falls. Wedge subsequently got into an argument with Lancey and said they had no right to be there on the land claimed by Batman. He 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 Fawkner continued to give public lectures on what a liar and degenerate Batman was.

However back in 1835 Wedge told everyone the name of the river was Yarra, and it stuck. Myths have now become entrenched around the history and meaning of the name, making it difficult to correct. This started when it was wrongly assumed that the natives with Wedge were locals. 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'.

The many Woiwurung 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 fifty years later by Hugh McCrae, the grandson of Georgina McCrae, an early settler on the Mornington Peninsula. In his grandmother's Boonwurrung language notes, one word containing 'yarra' referred to tidal flows. Hugh noted he thought it meant 'ever flowing' and once more the idea stuck. One Boonwurrung word about tidal flow has now been misapplied to claim that Yarra-Yarra means 'ever-flowing'.

Many people therefore now believe that Yarra was the original name of the river and that the local people were therefore 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. However that name of the river was Birrarrung not Yarra.

This error on how the Yarra was named 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 late September 1835, he and the 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 it was then he realised he had been mistaken in the name of the river. But it was already too late and the myth is still today firmly entrenched as fact.