

Naming places—on and around Kangaroo Island

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Placename research or toponymy is a relatively new venture for linguistics. Once restricted to the domains of history, geography, surveying and cartography, placename research has now begun to receive the attention it deserves in Australia, with several conferences, publications and bodies devoted entirely to toponymy. Institutions like the Australian National Placenames Survey and the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia are dedicated to recording all known Australian names, documenting their pronunciation, history, meaning and map location. This heritage is of great cultural significance in understanding the history of Australia and the lie of the land, of great interest to government, academic institutions and individuals alike. But toponymic research is never complete or exhaustive, since names change, people move on and knowledge is often lost.

Having lived in several countries and spent large periods of time not speaking my native tongue, I have become interested in the many subtleties in the ways people talk about, value and name things. These relationships are very stark in isolated island communities and it is for this reason I have chosen to do research in such challenging and exciting settings.

On Kangaroo Island, or 'KI' as it is known to locals, most of the colloquial names are not listed, gazetted or mapped. I recently travelled with a local person on a mail run down dusty roads, who pointed out places, names and stories while I photographed, asked questions and continually prodded for more information. KI people are happy to talk about their past and their heritage and interviewing and travelling with them across their properties and the country they know so well, brings forth unique information and insight into local culture and history. One can smell the scent of past happenings and individuals in their stories and yarns. But if the knowledge which is in the minds of the older members of the Kangaroo Island community is not documented soon, it will be lost forever.

The name 'Kangaroo Island' was given by Matthew Flinders in March 1802, in depiction of the hordes of kangaroos Flinders and his crew witnessed when they first

came across the Island. The French explorer Nicolas Baudin, who investigated the Island four weeks after meeting Flinders at nearby Encounter Bay, named the Island *Île Borda* in memory of Jean-Charles de Borda, the celebrated French navigator, mathematician and astronomer. Whereas Louis de Freycinet, Baudin's cartographer and surveyor, preferred to name it *Île Decres* after Admiral Denis Duc du Decres, a French Minister of Marine and Colonies. While 'Kangaroo Island' became the official title, both English and French placenames pepper the KI coastline commemorating those voyages led by Flinders and Baudin. The north coast bears names like Cape Dutton, Point Marsden, Cape Torrens and Point Morrison while on the south coast Cape de Couëdic, Cape Kersaint, Vivonne Bay and D'Estrees Bay honour the French expedition of Kangaroo Island. Although the pronunciation of these names has become anglicised, they are among the most obvious French influences on placenaming in South Australia.

Toponymy, like any other classification system, starts broad and becomes more and more specific. In Australia, it is coastal environments and their more obvious features, such as bays, peaks and other landmarks, that were named first by European explorers and colonists and much of this naming was done prior to them setting foot on land. They mark and identify broad aspects of place and space, helping people locate and remember places, events, people and things.

Throughout the period of European settlement and over time, more extensive land use has seen placenames become more specific and more personalised. Some may be called 'insider' names, as they describe smaller aspects of the landscape and are often not known outside of a specific family. They are often loaded with local knowledge, history and humour. The detailed study of an area's specific placenames is termed microtoponymy.

I have begun to document two aspects of the toponymic landscape of Kangaroo Island. The first is the location of offshore fishing ground names, and they are the tools and property of fisher folk. The second feature is what I term folk toponymy. They are esoteric insider names, which do not appear on maps.

Kangaroo Island fishing ground names depict aspects of insider knowledge and locational information associated intrinsically with the land and sea. Fishing is an important livelihood and a defining cultural activity in this remote island community. Kangaroo Island's fisher folk use an intricate system of naming and locating areas at sea. This system is extremely accurate and existed long before GPS technology. To locate a fishing ground or patch, the fisher has to know approximately how far out at sea they are. They then take two visual markings, lining up obvious facets of the landscape that can be seen offshore. These two marks form a triangle with the offshore point being the location of the fishing ground. This primitive method of triangulation is very precise and reliable. Fishers will never let anyone know their marks lest they give their favourite spots away to others. So when interviewing fishers on KI I often had to reassure my informants. 'I don't want to know your fishing spots, just the names and what they mean. I'm a linguist, not a fisher', I would say.

A couple of Kangaroo Island fishing grounds are: 'Between the Tits'—a ground known to a few local fishers, off Kangaroo Head using the space in between 'The Tits'—a local placename to describe the undulating landscape in the area—in lining up the ground. An old name, it has been used for ages. Another fishing ground is called 'No Reason'—a fisher stopped the boat one day when he was out with some other blokes. He put the anchor down and people asked, 'Why did you stop the boat and anchor here?' and the fisher said, 'No reason'. But it turned out to be one of the best fishing grounds in the Penneshaw area and is still used today. Named approximately 20 years ago, it's about half a mile out at sea. Whereas 'The Purple Patch' is just a couple of hundred yards out from shore. The area at sea appears purple due to an underwater reef there. It is also a great fishing spot and the name alludes to the expression, 'you've struck a purple patch', meaning 'you've done well'.

Here are some other names and fishing locations around the American River and Penneshaw area in the northern part of the Island. As one fisherman narrated to me, 'The fishing ground 'The Gums' is in the American River area, just off the coast. It's about 400 metres north-east from Edgar's Ground. It was named such as some big gum trees in by Deep Creek were used as marks. It was named by locals around World War Two. Eight hundred metres back from The Gums you come to 'The Front Door Patch'. It was named such by the old timers a long time ago, as you use the front door of the burnt-out house in the mark. From The Front Door you go out 400 metres to the south-west and you come to 'Gray's'. It was given that name because Gray, a butcher on KI, had built the house. It's a really old name.'

These fishing ground names, locations and associated folklore serve as historical, geographical and cultural markers of identity and place for the Kangaroo Islanders. They depict a time gone by and are a very precise orientation system that doesn't require any devices save local knowledge, a sound memory, a good eye and no fog. The names of boats, fishers, events and locational information, all merge in this esoteric, ephemeral and subtle process of placenaming.

Folk toponymy on Kangaroo Island is a category of naming in which local placenames depict and embody very specific events, history and land use throughout the Island's colourful past. They represent an important element in the speech of landowner families and people who know island areas like the backs of their hands, such as the names that a local Aboriginal man, Tiger Simpson, gave to several places. Borrowed from the South Australian capital's street names, Gawler Place and Anzac Highway describe aspects of the KI landscape that perhaps reminded Simpson of parts of Adelaide. The well-known 'Felt Hat Corner' is another name Simpson gave which is well and truly solidified into the memory of the Kangaroo Islanders. Simpson used to live there and he once put a felt hat on a stick in the bend of the road as a marker. It stayed there for a long time and has been called Felt Hat Corner ever since. Today a felt hat is still to be seen now, hanging on the sign that displays its name: 'Felt Hat Corner'. Other well-known corners are Dudd's Corner, Hog Bay River Corner, Grimshaw's Corner, Johnson's Corner, YMCA Corner near Pelican Lagoon and Staggerjuice Corner so named by a local who was fond of a drink.



A well known Kangaroo Island placename 2009. Courtesy the author

Pigs Head Corner is a crossing which remembers the legend of Fireball Bates, since Bates placed a pig's head under a tree there to remind him where he had buried some nails for his mate, the well-known local identity Nat Thomas, to collect. One of my informants showed me some rusty handmade nails he apparently discovered at this site in the 1950s. It is easy for legend, truth, reality and names to get mixed up when doing toponymic research, which just makes it even more fun and challenging. Sometimes not knowing the history of a placename is just as important and informative as knowing it. Spurious histories and the possibility of several plausible names or origins of names for one and the same place are just a couple of the exciting and interesting parts of doing placename research.

Less well-known corners on KI are Stink Corner on the Willson River Road, named such as this was where a gentleman used to dump wallaby carcasses after they were stripped for their hides and Clitcher's Corner, a crossing on the Blue Gum Road where a fellow called Clitcher used to live—marking history, as simply as that.

House names are a very personal aspect of folk toponymy. They are often clearly named and signposted and available to public purview on KI's roads. However, what they mean and what they commemorate is often unknown. Many illustrate and explore a sense of sentiment and yearning for Mother England and a longing for the residents to return to where they had come from. Names like Brighton Downs, Richmond Park, Brackenmore, Sandhurst, York Farm, Lincoln Green, Kent Park, Woodleigh and Wyndbourne Cottage might bring to mind the motherland or perhaps instead, speak of a complete lack of inventiveness. San Antone, St. Austell, New Country, Pioneer Bend, Poverty Park and Dehra Dun, recollecting a hill station

in northern India, show how people used names to relate to this new and unknown environment, by cross-referencing it with more familiar places elsewhere. Coranda, Yarrabee, Churinga and Bundilla appear to be of Aboriginal origin while Love Shack, The Beach House, Cozy Nuk, Ups and Downs and Bomb Alley demonstrate how fun, humour and entertainment also play a part in what names humans give things. Thus, toponymy provides pointers as to how humans learn to speak about, manage and orientate themselves in new and unfamiliar environments, with Kangaroo Island providing an excellent case study for learning about unofficial naming and understanding the history of settlement, land use and events in South Australia.

Further reading

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