

NGUNAWAL – THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS – AREA OF CANBERRA

It is only in the latter part of the twentieth century that the many of the people living in the ACT have become aware that Canberra is Ngunawal country. Many of the early stories told in family histories about the local Aboriginal people have not used the clan name, but have named the groups after the areas in which they have been seen to congregate for purposes such as ceremonies, corroborees and the occasional fight. Karen Williams and Rebecca Lamb are two local historians who have and are researching Ngunawal history and culture. Both have worked with Ngunawal elders, Don and Ruth Bell as well as archival and other documents relating to Ngunawal culture. I have quoted with their permission from both published and unpublished research.

The ACT when naming one of the new suburbs after the traditional owners chose to use the spelling Ngunnawal instead of the most common spelling, Ngunawal. This spelling has been and is of concern for a number of Ngunawal people.

Karen Williams' research indicates that the most common use for the clan name is Ngunawal. She also came across another spelling - 'Onerwal' used by George Mackness in a pamphlet called "George Augustus Robinson's Journey into Southeastern Australia, 1844. Royal Australian Historical Society - Journal and Proceedings V.27 pt 5. 1941. pg.26 refers to Yass natives as "Onerwal".

Following is an introduction and the list prepared by Karen Williams dated March 2005. As well as noting the spelling of Ngunawal it also gives the source that has information about the people.

"I have done a brief search of the AIATSIS library and come up with the following information. I think the important thing to understand with this issue is that the spelling of "Ngunawal" is from some of the early research by historians and Anthropologists that identifies that language group. The work of Matthews and Tindale are very highly respected sources for professionals in the field, and as such the spelling that they used was adopted as it was written. Remember that we are dealing with a European attempt to record an Aboriginal word and that there are many variations that can be found in other sources. As far as usage by historians and Anthropologists, and other researchers, "Ngunawal" version of spelling, appears to have been the most commonly accepted until it became a political issue of identity. You should note that Watson a local historian who published in 1927 did use two "n"s in Ngunawal. But that is the only example that I found.

References of Historical use of the spelling “Ngunawal”

The following list of references is based on works cited in the Museum of South Australia Ngunawal Website and other books found in the AIATSIS library. This was by no means an exhaustive search of the AIATSIS library, but it is enough to identify a wide spread influence of the work of R. H. Matthews and N.B. Tindale.

Ref: Matthews, R.H., in Royal Society of NSW – Journal and Proceedings, Vol42, 1908; 335-342, and Vol34, 1904, 284-305.

Matthews, R.H. *The Wiradyuri and other languages of NSW*, 1904, Page 284, “A cursory outline is also given of the language of the Ngunawal tribe, which bounds the Wiradyuri on a portion of the east.”

Matthews, R.H. *Vocabulary of Ngarrugu tribe, NSW*, 1908, Page 335: “Adjoining the Ngarrugu on the north from Queanbeyan to Yass, Booroowa and Goulburn, was the Ngunawal tribe.”

Matthews’ work is highly respected by historians as an early source particularly as it is original work based on his own observations made over his lifetime (1841-1918). The spelling of “Ngunawal” that he used would influence those who cited his work.

Ref: N.B. Tindale’s *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*; 1974 (1940).

The spelling of the word “Ngunawal” seems to depend on the source that the particular historian has used as a reference. Tindale’s map defining regions of languages is a major source for the work of most historians who were publishing from 1970s onwards and were citing Tindale’s map. This includes the Museum of South Australia who is still using the spelling on their Website. Aldo Massola, author of the school text book *The Aborigines of South-Eastern Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1971, uses the spelling “Ngunawal” in the key to a map of N.B. Tindale’s *Aboriginal Territories in the South East* adapted from Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia Vol. 64, 1940.

Ref: Tindale Tribes Ngunawal (South Australian Museum website).

<http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/tindale/HDMS/tindaletribes/ngunawal.htm> accessed 4/02/05.

Uses “Ngunawal” spelling in general text reflecting Tindale’s depiction of Aboriginal tribes.

Note: this site page lists alternative names: Ngunuwal, Ngoonawal, Wonnawal, Nungawal, Yarr, Yass tribe, Lake George, Five Islands tribe, Molonglo tribe, [‘gur: agang = no], Gurungada.

Ref: Flood, J. 1996, *Moth Hunters of the Australian Capital Territory*, Flood, Canberra.

“Ngunawal” spelling in *Map of language groups of south-eastern Australia (After N B Tindale 1974)* page 2; also “Ngunawal” spelling used throughout general text. Note: Aboriginal organizations referred on page 44 all use “Ngunawal” spelling.

Ref: Jackson-Nakano, A, 2001, *Aboriginal History Monograph 8, The Kamberri*, Aboriginal History Inc.,

Map 1: “Ngunawal” spelling used in Tindale’s linguistic map of south eastern Australia page xx (note: map and spelling based on Tindale’s 1974 *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*; “Ngunawal” spelling used in text page xxi.

Ref: Lea-Scarlett, E. 1993 (1968), *Queanbeyan District and People*, Queanbeyan Publishing Company, Queanbeyan.

“Ngunawal” spelling used in general text (page 20) cites endnote 30 F. Watson, *A Brief History of Canberra* (Canberra 1927), p.13.

Note: I checked Watson, F, 1927, and found that the spelling used by Watson was actually “Ngunnawal” (see page 14). However, Watson does not cite his source.

Ref: Gillespie, L., 1991, *Canberra 1820-1913*, AGPS Press, Canberra.

“Ngunawal” spelling used in general text page 44.

Ref: Gillespie, Lyall, L., *Aborigines of Canberra and nearby areas*, Canberra Historical Journal, 1979 ns4.

Page 20: “The Ngunawal tribe which frequented the Canberra district ...” cites N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, 1974.

Ref: Orr, J.C., 1978, *Trooper Ainslie: The Setting of the Limestone Plains (Canberra) And Its Hero*, KOA Productions, Sydney.

Orr does not directly site a reference.

Page 13: “The country of the Ngunawal people was plentiful in supply of food, ...”,

Page 14: “... under the long cold ... the Ngunawal walked to other land, ...”

The following is an excerpt from Karen William’s unpublished research that is part of her Phd thesis (2008) – it refers to the confusion of names used for the local Ngunawal.

Tribe tribal

I use the term ‘tribal’ hesitantly. Here I mean neighbouring tribes in the sense as in Ngunawal, Ngarigo, and other tribes from outside Ngunawal country that visited the region. On the other hand, I am also aware of the liberal use of the word ‘tribe’ by early colonial settlers to mean different family groups or clans that may have been part of the Ngunawal peoples. These groups or clans seemed to move separately about Ngunawal lands but came together from time to time for various reasons. For example, Bluett (1954: page) refers to three groups that appear to have co-existed in Ngunawal country as Tindale describes its parameters. The three groups seem to coincide with three of the geographical meeting places I have described – the Yass, Lake George, Canberra/Queanbeyan regions. These groups appear to have based themselves in the various localities but came together for common interests. In Bluett’s example, the Yass

and Lake George groups combined to attack the Canberra group that he calls the Canberry. After hostilities were sorted, the three groups returned to harmonious relations with no bitterness shown afterwards. It should be noted that Bluett (1954:1) reflects on his recollections of the various groups in relation to their proximity to Canberra and its city limits. Hence he places the Canberra-Pialligo group as central to his area of interest. The names that Bluett applies to the different family groups within the Canberra-Pialligo 'tribe' were applied by early European settlers of the region reflecting the geographical location of their camps. He qualifies this point by saying that the various groups were constantly on the move hunting food but came together for corroborees. The larger of these corroborees were held at Canbury Creek (now Sullivan's Creek) at the base of Black Mountain.

Names

I am aware that the present day names of landscape features is a contentious issue concerning reconciling colonial displacement of Aboriginal Australian people and recognition of their ongoing cultural connection to the land. However, for the purpose of locating the reader in the current landscape I have used current names in everyday use. There is currently work being done by Ann Jackson-Nakano for the ACT Government to find evidence confirming appropriate Aboriginal Australian language place names for the ACT region. (see Ngambri Ancestral Names). However, such a project is a very difficult one with discrepancy in the meaning of even the early colonial names of features and locations. To then try to link the appropriate Aboriginal Australian language and nomenclature to those places is fraught with contention. For example, Ann Jackson-Nakano has argued (page 28) that where the Molonglo River flows through the Limestone Plains and today's central Canberra was actually called the Kembery River by local Aboriginal Australians. However this is debatable as there appears to be some confusion as to whether Kembery applies to the Molonglo River or to a tributary creek. Nakano-Jackson refers to evidence in the journal of John Lhotsky of 1834 and Robert Hoddle's survey map of district of 1832 to show that Molonglo River was indeed the Kembery River. The same evidence, on the other hand, is used by Gwendoline Wilson in her book *Murray of Yarralumla* (page 61) to argue that 'Kembery' was in fact 'Canberry' and did not apply to the Molonglo River. Rather it applied to the tributary creek which she said flowed through one of the Limestone plains between Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie called the Canberry Plain.

Similarly there are many European theories about the name Canberra that is accepted by many authorities to be a derivation or just a different way of pronouncing, Kembery that refers to the plain around the two mountains, Black and Ainslie. Mr Don Bell, Ngunawal elder has learnt language and published a children's book in language states that the name means woman's breasts because of the view of the two mountains from the Yass entrance to the area. "

NGUNAWAL PATHWAY - BLACK MOUNTAIN TO TUGGERANONG VIA GURA BUNG DHAURA HILLS (including Capital Hill), RED HILL, MUGGA MUGGA.

Black Mountain – known to the early settlers as Blacks’ Hill because of the large numbers of Ngunawal people camping on the area of Black Mountain Peninsula, was an important male initiation area and ceremonial mountain.

On this mountain are many stone arrangements as well as scarred trees. Black Mountain Peninsula was the area where a major battle between the Wiradjuri and Ngunawal people took place.¹ On the plain below the area of Black Mountain Peninsula where the Canberra Race Course was established on Kaye’s property of Springbank was the site of a Bora Ground. Don Bell told me a dream time story about the Acton land where the National Museum now stands. He told of a young couple who could not marry who ran away together. The couple were not destined to a happy life together – were caught and died. Several camping grounds around the mountain have been recorded by Europeans and include Black Mountain Peninsula, Coppin’s Crossing and Hall.

From Black Mountain the people crossed the Molonglo river to the hills of Stirling Park (Guru Bung Dhaura) and probably continued up through *the Gap* to Capital Hill – also used as a camping ground - before continuing via Red Hill, Mugga Mugga to Tuggeranong where ceremonies and corroborees were also carried out. This was another important centre.

Insight into the Ngunawal connection with country is found in an article on-line [<http://www.tuggeranonghomestead.com.au/history.default.htm>] by Karen Williams. An excerpt follows:

The local Aboriginal tribe, the Ngunawal peoples, consists of a number of different clans bounded by the broad language groups of Wiradjuri, Ngrijo (Ngarigo), Gundungurra and Yuin. The Tuggeranong plain of Canberra is at the southern extremity of Ngunawal country. The Canberra region is generally understood to have been a meeting place, suggesting that there was a reliable food and water supply and that the pathways were significant as people moved from place to place through transitional country boundaries. Following river and creek corridors and the ridges and spurs of hills and mountains. Pathways may be the means of access across the region and, in the case of the main ranges visible from the highpoints of the Tuggeranong area, a physical and visual link to major spiritual centres and gathering places in the Snowy Mountains.

¹ Information from Mr Don Bell, Ngunawal elder whose family carried out ceremonial duties in the Canberra District. These duties passed from father to youngest son. Mr Bell mentioned to me a number of areas of significance that included Black Mountain, Capital Hill and the hills of Stirling Park (Gura Bung Dhaura).

For Aboriginal culture there are inextricable links between sacred and secular landscape values. Aboriginal people always did things with a witness, whether it is the spirits of a mountain, the water, the flowers. Therefore, open sites such as the stone artefact scatters around Tuggeranong homestead will be related to other landscape features by story and association with significant rock outcrop yet equally suitable rock is not used in other places. Put into the local context, Ngunawal dreaming refers to people emerging from their origins beneath the rocks.

Rebecca Lamb in her research came across an early description of a corroboree that took place on 5th November 1831 at Tuggeranong. Rebecca in correspondence to me about the corroboree said: *William Edward Riley, source ML MS A109, mfm CY 738, 1817-1856 page 61 ... it [reference to the Corroboree] was found by me in my research for the biography of Thomas Macquoid. The Corroboree manuscript was submitted for publication in the 'New Monthly Magazine', London, then news was received by Riley in January 1828 that it had been rejected. This suggests that the rejection note could have been mailed back from London to Riley in NSW taking about 3 months, taking into account its long voyage to England in the first place (another 3 months?) so that takes the date of the corroboree back to at least mid 1827 making it the earliest known account of a gathering of its kind in our district... Contact had already occurred (in our district? - Tuggeranong) because one of the women was wearing a man's shirt and of course the dreadful rum is mentioned.*

Part of this document follows:

Corobborie or a Dance of a Tribe of Natives in the Southern Interior of New South Wales from the journal of an Anglo-Australian on his return to the Territory of his birth in 1830.

The Namitch tribe of natives were assembled here, forming rude huts of boughs of trees and bark open on the north-east side and arranged in the form of a crescent; they had made these 'gunyahs', as they term them, more substantially than any I had yet seen - only erecting them when in expectation of a continuance of cold and rainy weather, and generally close to some cattle or sheep station where they remain nearly all winter assisting the stockman in grinding and eating his wheat or maize... The men of the this tribe were mostly tall and well made, the women graceful and good looking by comparison and either much cleaner or of a lighter colour than usual, being somewhat darker than a bright copper colour; they were clothed in large Opossum Skin cloaks loosely fastened with careless elegance around the neck exposing the left arm and shoulder and descending to the knee which with the foot, ankle, arm, wrist and hand are of exquisite workmanship and might rival those of their fairer sisters in Europe... -

The article continues with a description of a corroboree that mentioned that they adorned themselves *with narrow streaks of white clay across the chest, down the front of their legs and arm, and circles around their eyes...*²

Rebecca Lamb also commented that William Edward Riley was probably a guest of his friend Thomas Macquoid who was at the time unofficially occupying John McLaren's Janevale (Tuggeranong) and goes on to mention that Macquoid purchased McLaren's and Murdoch's adjoining land grants renaming the estate – Waniassa. Macquoid's Wanissa became the Tuggeranong Homestead after 1858. [Waniassa is an Indonesian word – not Aboriginal.]

Rebecca Lamb also came across a reference about a battle in Lyall Gillespie's collection, Card Index, extract from the *Queanbeyan Age* 21.3.1919. She also commented that the battle didn't take place at Waniassa or Tuggeranong but it does mention Macquoid and Wright who obviously witnessed it. She continued *As it was 'early thirties it could have been witnessed by either Sheriff Macquoid or Hya Macquoid, the latter who had arrived in NSW in 1836.*

Lyall Gillespie's card contains the following information:

An old-time Tribal Battle, An esteemed correspondent one of the old identities of this district whose knowledge of the district extends to the thirties of the last century [1830s] furnishes us of the following instance of a tribal battle between the Aboriginal tribes on Monaro and this district. In the early thirties of last century [1830s] men of the times when the black tribes engaged in their tribal fights. On one occasion I well remember the King of the Monaro came with his forces to wage war against the Canberra blacks then known as the Pialago³ tribes. The plains lying between Duntroon and Queanbeyan on the east side of the river not so long back were known as the Pialago Plains. They presented a picturesque sight their almost nude bodies grotesquely marked in blue and white war paint with feathers in their hair each one furnished with spear boomerang and shield. They were lithe and active fellows standing over six feet in height a contrast to the poor creatures that used to hang about the settlements in after years. The blackfellow of those days was a savage in all his glory but if he was any savager that the white man of his day records do not tell us. The opposing forces drew up in fighting attitude but on the open plain Monaro and Pialago braves prepared for a determined contest. The Canberra forces drew a line across the plain and defied the Monaro foe to cross it. Poor simple wildmen of the bush ready enough to engage in a struggle with each other, tribe against tribe, to their own weakening. It never struck them how much better it would have been to combine against the white usurper whose foot was already on their soil and before whose encasing tide ere long they would pass away to be a dark shadow over the face of the sun. There is a tradition that the Canberra blacks were

² The full article is reproduced in *A STORY OF CAPITAL HILL* Gugler 2009

³ Pialligo (modern spelling) is an area of Duntroon that includes near the airport.

camped on the Gundaroo River in the vicinity of the present village of Sutton when at daybreak the Yass tribe rushed their camp but to their own sorrow for the Canberra warriors were too strong for them and made short work of their discomfiture. But to return to the fight between the Monaro and the Canberra tribes. According to Mr Macquoid of Tuggranong and Mr Wright of Lanyon it was a grand stand-up affair and lasted throughout the day. Spears were flying and boomerangs whistling through the air amid the whoopings and yells of the combatants and the incessant rattling of their shields. But towards the evening the King of the Monaro's army drew off his forces. Next morning the Monaro-ites marched up in front of the Pialago-ites with a loud shout and with much stamping of their feet on the ground seemingly to frighten the Canberra warriors. But there had been a heavy fall of rain and the ground hung soft and slushy their blue and white paint became presently obliterated with the mud they had stirred up. Their ludicrous state elicited roars of laughter from the Pialago warriors and this seemed to so enrage the Monaro braves that they rushed with blind fury on their grinning foes only to spend their strength in vain- seeing this the King of Monaro hurriedly withdrew his men from the field and began a long and disastrous retreat while ever on their rear hung like an avenging nemesis the harassing foe. On and on for a full 15 miles past Cuppacumbalong the territory of King Bongong [Hongyong?] eight more miles to Naas another 18 miles up to Booth's Creek (as it is now called but the blacks named Durrandimmey) and so retreated to their own territory defeated and disgraced. In after years there was found the skeleton of a blackfellow in a small cave out that way at a place called Bobeyyong. [Bobeyan?] It was of great stature. The writer was shown a cleft between two rocks out that way where some of the bones of the wounded in that battle who had died were packed. It was somewhere about eight or nine miles up Alummy Creek. In another cave in the same neighbourhood some years later were found a few skeletons and some broken spears. Source: Queanbeyan Age (An Old Battle) 21.3.1919.

Don Bell and other Ngunawal people have kept their connection with country and that is clearly evidenced in Don's story that is quoted in the Introduction of the book, *A STORY OF CAPITAL HILL* Gugler 2009. Another published example of concern about country is found in an article in the *Canberra Times* Monday 23rd February (2004 or 5?) that quotes from an interview with elder Don Bell in relation to his concerns regarding a proposed dam at Naas :

Elder gives Libs' dam plan thumbs-up. Fears a proposed new dam for the Naas Valley would destroy Aboriginal heritage were dismissed by one of the community's leading indigenous elders yesterday. Don Bell said that traditional custom could cope with the dam. He gave it his blessing and called for a speedy start to construction...Aboriginal custom allowed for significant sites in the dam area to be moved or protected and they would not be an impediment to its going ahead. "Traditional culture has a history of covering cultural secrets and the covering of the Naas River Valley with water is no different." He said the rituals for moving sites were well established and could be used for any found on the dam floor. "For sites having a problem being buried, their

dreamings can be re-established only after cleansing of the new dreaming site has been performed. Part of the cleansing ceremony is fire so last year's fires tell us that it's OK to move those sites because mother nature has already cleansed the area for the rebirthing of the new dreaming places."

Most of the information about Ngunawal people in the early contact years come from the recollections of Europeans including for example Stewart Mowle who took over the running of Yarralumla property in 1838 when still a teenager. He was a close friend of Terrence Aubrey Murray who at that time owned the property and both were close friends with the local Aboriginal lads and in addition to going on many hunting trips with them, learnt language.

The majority of early stories about the Ngunawal people suggest that there were no conflicts or fights between the settlers and the natives. I came across one reference that mentions a battle that took place, but because it is one of the important documents that I filed away very carefully and now cannot find it I cannot include it here. Certainly one reads in some of the stories about Europeans taking native women for wives or casual sex that led to at least one death of a white person and by the time the Federal Parliament opened in 1927 the official story was that no Aboriginal people lived in the Territory.

I am aware of Aboriginal people living in the territory during my years at Westlake. One lady, who was a Cootamundra girl, came to the territory with her husband in 1913 and remained her for the rest of her long life. She had a large family, one of whom also lived at Westlake and had a large family. It was a different story for those seen or recognized by authorities. Don Bell mentioned to me that when he was a young man if seen in the territory by the police he was taken to the border and told to move on.

It is time that the Ngunawal to tell their stories that perhaps will go towards redressing the balance of history.