

# The Argus

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## Our River Has Had Four Names

“Batman” “Freshwater” “Bay-ray-rung” “YARRA”

By TAGGERTY

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY JOKES told about the Yarra, particularly by people from the northern states, whose tidal rivers are so much wider than our fresh-water stream. But the biggest joke of all about our little river is the name itself-Yarra. It was an unintentional joke, no doubt, and few people-even in these days of adult education-have heard of it; yet to a conscientious historian the naming of the Yarra, if not exactly a joke, was a distinctly funny business.

Many of us remember that when we went to school we were taught that Yarra (or Yarra Yarra) was the native name for our river; and that it meant "ever flowing." On both counts this information was incorrect. The disillusioned Lord Byron, in *Don Juan*, wrote: "I defy historians to put a fact without some leaven of a lie."

In the case in point, however, local historians have established a lie that, has some leaven of truth. Almost the first white man ever to see the Yarra (for convenience we adhere to that name) was John Batman.

Early in 1835 he sailed up to the head of Port Phillip Bay to found a settlement. His explorations finally led him past the junction with the Saltwater River, up the Yarra, to where a ledge of rocks caused a waterfall or rapid.. These rocks existed where Queen's Bridge now stands. Above them the water was non-tidal and fresh. It was of this locality that Batman wrote: "This will be the place for a village." (There seems to be plenty of historical confirmation of that.)

BATMAN ADMIRERED this freshwater stream very greatly, not only for its beauty (it had plenty, even in its natural state), but also for its economic significance. So he named it the River Batman, and- as such it was shown on the map he submitted to the authorities in connection with his claim for a tract of land around Port Phillip. Name Number One.

Batman returned to Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) shortly afterwards, leaving some of his party – including a certain John Helder Wedge-at a spot on the western side of the bay called Indented Head. During Oat man's absence John Pascoe Fawkner's party-under Captain Lancey-arrived in Port Phillip. They, too. made their way up the Yarra. Their judgment in the selection. of a site for a settlement coincided with that of their predecessor.

They decided to establish themselves near the ledge of rocks on the Yarra. They called the stream the Freshwater River, in contrast to the Saltwater River, which they had passed farther down. Name, Number Two.

Fawkner's party had not been there long before they had a visitor in a whaleboat. He was J. H. Wedge, from Indented Head, who had seen their ship sail up the bay. Wedge was accompanied by a native from the district he had left. His purpose was to warn Fawkner's men off. But, Machiavelli-like, he did not declare it at first.

WEDGE WAS A SURVEYOR. He was born in England, and had gone to Van Diemen's Land as second assistant to the Government Surveyor. An early report on his capabilities was not very flattering. Hoping for a big increase in his worldly possessions,, he had joined in the Batman enterprise. With his aboriginal companion, he spent a day or so around the camp of Fawkner's men, taking notes and making sketches. It was not until after he had obtained food from Captain Lancey for his return journey to Indented Head that he delivered a written order to quit. This incurred the succinctly expressed disdain of the sturdy captain-but that is another story.

Now a little should be said about Wedge's companion. This native came from the' comparatively arid western shores of Port Phillip. The few watercourses that occur in that area are insignificant, and rarely run strongly, except after rain. When this blackfellow saw what, to him, was a most impressive stream, running over the rocks by the embryo village, pointing, he gave voice to an exclamation.

Wedge heard it, and noted it. He did both imperfectly. History tells us that the native cried, "Yarra, Yarra".; it tells us that the words meant "flowing, flowing" (or "ever-flowing") ; and that they represented the name of the river. Students of the aborigines and their languages, however, tell us that there was no such word as "yarra" among the dialects of the Port Phillip blacks.

They also tell us that the native name for the stream was - something entirely different. Actually - and here comes the leaven of truth in our history-what the native exclaimed was undoubtedly, "Yanna! Yanna!" This word was in the vocabularies of local tribes. Its literal meaning was to "walk"; hence to move, or flow.

(Native dialects were limited in their vocabulary. Frequently one word did duty for two or three similar things. For instance, in the Oorongir language -Healesville district - "yellemba" meant day, and also light. "Willam" meant camp, also bark of a tree. Here we see the association of ideas ab work.)

Wedge evidently thought that the word ejaculated by his black attendant could be spelt "yarrow," for thus-not as "yarra"-he noted it down in his field book. In this, perhaps, he was unconsciously influenced by another river far across the seas - the Yarrow, in Selkirkshire, which Words worth and others had made famous about the time of Wedge's school days in England. He also took the word to be the aboriginal descriptive name for our river.

In the parlance of those days "Yarrow Yarrow" soon became "Yarra Yarra," for few, if any, native words ended in "ow," while many did in "a." Name Number Three.

It might be wondered why the name given by Wedge should stick, for, in spite of his warning, Fawkner's party remained, and actually became the founders of Melbourne. For a satisfactory reason we must enter somewhat into the realm of speculation. The word "Yarra" was euphonious; easily remembered; and had a significance (albeit somewhat legendary) which made it appropriate.

Batman had named the river after himself. This name would be repugnant to Fawkner's party. The latter's name, the Freshwater River, did not appeal to the imagination. Perhaps it was thought that the choice of the third name was a good compromise between the rival parties. Anyhow, it has been known as the Yarra since 1836.

IT IS INTERESTING to quote the following from a published account of a visit to Melbourne in the year 1841 by the Hon Robert Dundas Murray, of Edinburgh: "The Yarra-Yarra, or the overflowing, for that is the meaning of its native name." The word could just as easily have meant overflowing as ever-flowing, for -as we have mentioned earlier-it had no place in the local language. Farther north, however, "yarra" appears in the native dialects. On parts of the Murray it meant "wood", while in central New South Wales "yarra" meant "gumtree."

But what was the native name for Melbourne's river? There is ample evidence to show what it was. Edward M. Curr, one of Victoria's pioneer squatters, and author of a valuable series of volumes on the Australian race, was informed by aborigines living near its banks that the name was Bay-ray-rung. Others spell the name Birarrang - no doubt the name was somewhat variable, like other native words, adjacent tribes injecting some slight difference.

Wedge himself heard the name, but again he noted it down incorrectly. He spelt it Bar-rern (probably owing to a slurring pronunciation on the part of a native); and he took it to refer not to the river, but to an area adjacent to the river. Altogether, from all accounts, J. H. Wedge was not a meticulous person, otherwise Name Number Four would not now remind us of the old adage, that the first shall be the last.