

Baal Udthu Yamble Yabba

By T. W. Mitchell

MY knowledge of the aborigines and their association with the Alps springs mainly from hearing my father and uncle talk of the days when they were brought up with the mountain blacks of Tangambalanga (Tan-gam-boo-iam—crayfish) on the Kiewa. Their father (Thomas Mitchell—my grandfather) was local Honorary Guardian of Aborigines there and he and his brother John (my great-uncle John Francis Huon Mitchell) had also been brought up with the mountain blacks. Great-uncle John had once, as a boy, from under the possum skin cloaks of "King" George of the Woradgery, watched the highly secret initiation of the male youths of the tribe. It was this "King" George who, at the risk of his own life, warned our cousins, the Heriots, of a raid by his own tribe on the mountain homestead at Dora Dora. Even so it was only with considerable difficulty that the yelling black waves that suddenly sprang out of the darkness of the midnight ranges were beaten back.

As a boy I listened rigid with fascination as I heard the tales of this raid, and of the raid on Bonegilla Station in 1840 and the raid by a buckeening party of blacks on the Mitchell family station at Thurgoona (just outside Albury) in 1854. The war boomerangs and spears rattled up against the mud walls of the old family homestead that night. The kitchen was abruptly turned into

a casualty clearing depot. My father told me the story many, many years ago.

Great-uncle John's dictionary of the Woradgery (or Wiradjuri) language is in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and there are a number of his papers there, too. There are various text books on the aborigine languages in this library, but they do not yield much information on this particular subject.

I myself can remember Skerry, a black, who used to ride round the mountains and spear fish in the Murray below our house when I was a boy. For a long time I was frightened to go near him in case some of his blackness came off onto me.

The blacks lived in the vicinity of the Alps, but in the main, only went up into the snowlands proper at the season when the bogong moths were available. In general, the aborigines, rather like the Maoris round the ski-ing grounds of Ruapehu and Tongariro, regarded the mountains with a good deal of fear, and said that evil spirits and horrible men with the spirits of foul beasts and other terrifying beings lived up there. However, periodically they made expeditions to the more remote valleys of the montane zone for various woods for weapons or the edible hearts of tree ferns. But all the same in some cases these visits could not have been altogether transitory because one of the Upper Goulburn tribes was known as the

Yowang-illam or "dwellers on the mountain." ("Aborigines of Victoria"). The Taoungurong tribe also lived among the mountains of the Upper Goulburn.

As the blacks always named places after some striking circumstances, e.g., food, drawn from that particular district, their language has not a very close association with the snowlands. In addition, the blacks never had any written language and the passing of names by word of mouth down the generations must have inevitably resulted in a fair amount of distortion. Early searchers into the aboriginal language, like Great-uncle John, were further handicapped by the propensity of the blacks not to admit that they did not know, and accordingly to give some kind of answer, even in incorrect, rather than to give none at all. There is a lot of guess work with aboriginal words and their meanings.

The following note I have extracted from Great-uncle John's papers illustrates the difficulty. Referring to the name Yarrangobilly, N.S.W., he writes . . . "when asked the meaning I could only suggest one from the following: 'Yarran, red or terra-cotta; Billy is always the name of the frog. There is a tree frog, very rare, reddy-brown, with pink eyes—seeks food only at night—I think Yarrangobilly is named after this frog."

The English-isation of aboriginal words has also added to our troubles. According to what my father told me when I was a boy, Tom Groggin (below Kosciusko) has nothing to do with a human being at all, but is a white man's corruption of the blackfellow word Ton-a-rogin, which is a water spider. Bungonia (near Goulburn, N.S.W.) is a corruption of Coo-ya-tong, meaning a place of echoes.

On 31st July, 1869, a circular was sent to all the local Honorary Guardians of Aborigines to ascertain native names for geographical features. Grandfather Thomas Mitchell in his reply (see "The Aborigines of Victoria," Vol. II, p. 174) stated that the Mitta Mitta River's name was derived from "Mida-Modunga" (from reeds called Modunga); Mount Murraramanbang (between Kiewa and Yackandandah) from Mung-ga-rung-doon (Mung-ga-rung-a — Tall; and doon—Kill); and Wodonga from Woodanga.

My opinion is that Bundarra (river on the Bogong High Plains) should be Mundarra (thunder); Jounama (mountain in Kiandra snowlands) should be Kunama (snow); and

Corryong should be Caryoong (a girdle of possum wool) and not from Cooyong (a bandicoot). Also that Biggara is a corruption of Birrigurra (brown hawk) and not of Big-garee (red clay used for bodily decoration). My electorate (Benambra) is probably derived from Benambula, the name of a mountain between Omeo and Tallangatta.

Cootapatamba (lake under summit of Kosciusko) is, I understand, a name imported from the Macleay River blacks and I always feel that Jargungal is a similar external spurious label.

Geehi puzzles me because the aboriginal name for that area is Adgintoothbung. Adgin is water; and Toothbung is cold; and the area can be, as I know to my cost, both cold and wet.

I heard scraps of Woradgery spoken as a boy, but then practically only when my uncle wanted to swear. The blacks did not do so badly with expletives either.

The language was soft sounding. A beautiful expression was Bargoonie-yarl-beyan, which means "By the white moon—how wonderful." "Wonderful" in the sense of "true."

Other aboriginal words connected with the mountains were:—Bargoona—snow white; Ba-Puthenbong—mountain or snow duck; and Gibbo—snow mountains. The last mentioned also applied to a boy during his early initiation period when he was obliged to wear a cap of white clay. The following words are also connected with the mountains:—snow is rendered as "Goonama," "Dalara" or "Kunama" (the latter the far most common form). There are two rare forms, "Cabbing" or "Kabbing" (Victoria) and "Gunyima" (Tasmania). I do not know any name for ice, but there are some thirty names for "mountain." "Bulgar" or "Bolgar" is a hill. There is a Bulgar's Hill in the N.S.W. snowlands, and Bolga is the site for the new township of Tallangatta. "Doon" also meant a hill. Munja or munjar or mungar is a cod or an eel, hence, presumably, Mt. Manjar (5258ft.) near Mt. Black Jack in the Maragle Mountains of the N.S.W. snowlands. Strezlecki wrote it as Mandjar.

Great-uncle John was of the opinion that where "o" or several "o's" occur in the name of a place, a mountain or hill (or hills) may be looked for; e.g., "Coor-oon-doona" (our Mitchell family home near Goulburn, N.S.W., in 1819) meant "many hills." Hence Omeo, Monaro. Thus Bogong is a Woradgery word

for mountain. Great-uncle John said there is "no warrant for spelling 'Bogong' 'Bugong' and moreover the above is the reason for 'o' not 'u' being used. Another spelling of Bogong is Boogong which may easily, in view of this, be the really correct spelling.

My theory is that in all probability Bogong or Boogong was more properly the aboriginal name for the bogong moth and that, in accordance with their usual custom of name application, the blacks called any peak where they found the moth, "Bogong," hence "Bogong" became the name for mountain.

"Long" generally indicated a plain, hence when one of his black said to Great-uncle John, when he was travelling up the Kiewa in 1843, "Cuborn budgery win-a-long" he meant a "very good summer plain." Hence also Toolong (a plain with water) in the Dargal snowlands of N.S.W.

The Woradgery lanugage did not have a "w" or a "z". Weri udtha bindigary "z" neina Woradgery," is how "King" Yarry of the Woradgery tribe would have said it.

The tribes principally connected with the Australian mainland Alps were Woradgery; Jaitmathang; Wolgal; Krauatungalung; and Ngarigo. This is according to Tindale's "Distribution of the Australian aboriginal tribes."

The Woradgery's "bimble" or tribal ground was in the general area lying between the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers. These people were, so the Mitchell's found, a source of a good deal of worry and trouble, but were, for all that, neither savage nor treacherous. The Woradgery are now sometimes called the Riverine Tribe. They were sometimes called the Woradjerg Tribe; sometimes the Weri-ari; sometimes the No-No. Their frontier on the Murray ran from Howlong to the dark sulky mountains round Dora Dora, a distance of nearly 100 miles.

The Jaitmathang or Yai-itma-thang Tribe held their sway over the mountainous country holding the headwaters of the Mitta, Tambo, Ovens and Indi Rivers. I live approximately in the Jaitmathang bimble at Towong (more correctly, Nowong) Hill. Either that or possibly in the Wolgal bimble.

The Wolgal Tribe inhabited the vicinity of the Kiandra snowlands and extended to the heads of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Tumut Rivers.

The Krauatungalung Tribe inhabited the area of the Buchan and Snowy Rivers and extended inland as far as the Cobberas.

The Ngarigo Tribe lived on the Monaro

tableland from Dalgety to Nimmitabel and then westward to the Great Divide of the Alps.

The Ginning-matong Tribe lived on the Tallangatta Creek, while Grandfather Thomas Mitchell stated that a tribe called the Pallangan-middal lived on the lower Kiewa. A tribe named the Thar-a-mirttong also lived on the Kiewa.

A tribal district was known as a bimble and to trespass into another tribe's bimble without carrying a credential stick was a very serious offence and called for immediate and violent retribution. Across the Murray from where I write this now, the early settlers found a place in the foothills of the snow-capped Dargal Mountains that was white with blackfellows' bones. The story is that a tribe returning from the Kosciusko Alps, where they had been on a bogong moth hunt, found a strange Murrumbidgee tribe unlawfully trespassing on their bimble (now called Cochrane's Gap). The bones told the story of the vicious battle that followed.

But the severe laws attaching to bimble were relaxed almost completely among the various different tribes who went up together at the same time in the snowlands (the snowlands were regarded as no-man's land) after bogong moths. On these specific occasions a kind of ancient Greek Olympic truce was declared because the tribes concerned were then out of bimble, few weapons were carried, if at all, and a general atmosphere of harmony prevailed. This is an example we later day visitors to our snowlands could follow with profit!

A scared Monaro black guided my French ancestor (Charles Huon de Kerilleau) who was the first white man ever to reach the Upper Murray. He returned via Mt. Bogandjera, which he named Ike's Mount.

The blacks inhabiting the mountains of our Upper Murray district slipped down from Mt. Werमतong (Werमतong—spear handle) to massacre a party of the Faithful family at Murdering Flat on the bank of the River Murray itself just below Tintaldra.

Another war party forced the original settlers (the Spaldings) at Thologolong (Thologolong—a plain with a creek) lower down the Murray to withdraw leaving two white men dead. A hail of spears also drove the Spaldings out of the Bungil Mountains. The eerie drama of these lonely mountain vastnesses was continued by the blacks of the Dora Dora (more correctly Daara Daara)

Mountains spearing a man to death in an isolated hut just up the creek from the Dora-Dora Gap (about 45 miles upstream from Albury)—my father told me of this; and there is another "Murdering Flat" on the Tooma (Tooma—a large gum tree) River just below Welumba Mountains not far from our road into the ski-ing at Wolseley Gap. At least one white man was murdered by the blacks at this spot. Murdered with unbelievably fiendish cruelty, it is said. But then, it is also said he asked for it.

McMillan, the explorer, had scares from the blacks in the mountains near Omeo. This was probably the Gundanora or Kandangora-mittung tribe, a sub-tribe of the Jaitmathan.

According to Brough Smyth ("The Aborigines of Victoria") some 500 men, women and children took up residence for a few months each year on the wind-swept, elevated plain of Omeo. They hunted and fished in the mountains northward to the Coborras; southward and eastward to the Tambo; and westward to the "Bogong Range" via the Gibbs and Mitta Rivers. By 1852, the Gundanoras were at war with the local cattlemen.

The names of Black Charlotte, Kitty Howcarley, Neddy Wheeler, Black Mag, Bangi, Merriman, Harlequin, Flash Margaret, Jack-endeby and others of our mountain blacks flash across my mind as I write this tonight, a misty procession of strangely attractive people who could have told us much had we cared to learn. Gone are the lot of them now, absorbed into the mountains to which they belonged. A hollow tree rotting over there under the snow-capped Dargals disgorged a pathetic bundle of bones identified by the shreds of a black silk dress as those of Flash Margaret. A faded photograph shows me Black Mag. Merriman was the main leader in the massacre of the Faithfuls in what is now Benalla. He loved eating human flesh. Grandfather Mitchell once saw him padding through the Baranduda Mountains carrying a half-eaten leg of a Chinaman. Harlequin was shot by a police trooper on Mt. Murramarangbong. A half-moon shaped piece of pitted brass acting as a paper weight on the desk beside me now bears the inscription, "Kitty Howcarley, Queen of Tow wong, Hume River." Where is poor old Kitty now? Over on the wall there is a large photograph of Neddy Wheeler clad in his possum skins and with his spears



The A.S.M.?

Photo. T. W. Mitchell.

and favourite boomerang. The heavy jaws create an un-human ape-like appearance which is not unattractive, but it is his eyes that create in you a strange haunting feeling. They see, in a sad resigned wistfulness, something fundamentally of the universe, down long aeons of time, that we will never see. Neddy Wheeler (sometimes also known as Needy Wheeler or "Old Ned") did not believe in worrying the divorce courts and is said that in support of this principle he roasted one wife and killed another. Liquor, of course, also had its grip on him. But what ever his failings, matrimonial or otherwise, may have been, he was a wonderful man. He taught my father the mountain ways of our Alps and a lore of the bush we will never know. My father always spoke of him with love and respect and this picture was one of the few he had in his room when he died.

With the burning of all the old black-fellows canoe trees by the big bushfires in 1939, the last visible traces of the aborigines in our section of the Alps has gone, but sometimes up in those lonely gorge-heads in the snowlands I am sure I see fleeting dusky human forms.

[Postscript.—The translation of the Woadgergy phrase used in the title of this article is—"I am not a — liar."]