

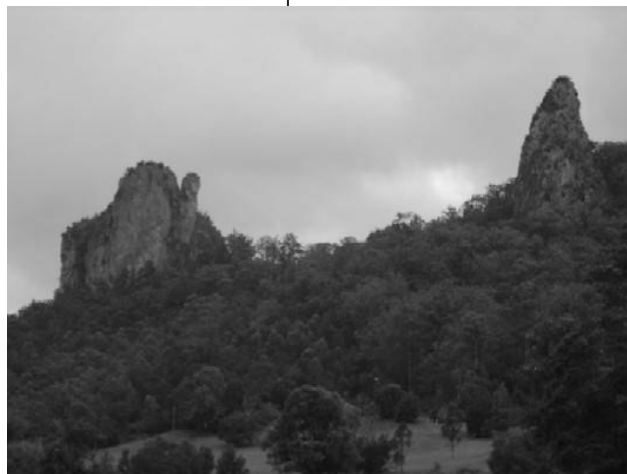
## How Nimbin got its name

There are two distinct complexes of meaning that have been associated with the name of the township of Nimbin, in north eastern New South Wales<sup>1</sup>. One of these connects the name of the town with the Bundjalung word for “camp”, “hut” or “house”. I will call this “etymology A”. The other connects it with the Bundjalung word for “a little man who dwells in mountains or rocks”. I will call this “etymology B”.

The linguist Margaret Sharpe interprets the phonology of the two Bundjalung words as follows. The word for “camp”, “hut” or “house” is /ŋumbij/~ /ŋu.mbij/~ /nimbij/~ /nimbi(j)/, which would be spelt as *ngumbiyn* or *nguumbiyn* or *nimbijn* or *nyimbi(yn)* (1995: 81, 89, 91; 2002: 56, 57, 58).<sup>2</sup> She observes that the pronunciation with an initial /ŋ/ is more common than the pronunciation with an initial /n/ or /j/ (2002: 58). For present purposes I treat the reference form of this word as being *ngumbiyn*.

The word for “little man who dwells in mountains or rocks” is /nimbuŋ/~ /ni:mbuŋ/ (Sharpe 1995: 81; 2002: 58), which would be spelt as *nyimbuyn* or *nyiimbuyn*.<sup>3</sup> For present purposes I treat the reference form of the word as being *nyiimbuyn*.

Etymology A, which derives the name of Nimbin from the Bundjalung word for “hut” or “camp”, has been recorded in print in Johnston (1982: 4-5)<sup>4</sup>, and attributed to a Gidhabal Elder. *A priori*, this etymology seems intrinsically more plausible than the other, for reasons that are more or less self-evident. Presumably there was once a camp at Nimbin, and it is likely that in everyday speech people said that they lived at, or went to and from, *ngumbiyn*. As far as I can tell the word *ngumbiyn* is not, itself, able to be analysed into further etymological components.



*Nimbin Rocks (photo by the author)*

Given the plausibility of this etymology (“camp”, “hut” or “house”) it is hard to explain the persistence with which the alternative etymology (“little man who dwells in mountains or rocks”) is repeated. The earliest sources I have found that associate the latter meaning with “Nimbin” are two anonymous articles published in the 1960s.

Both of these (Anon. 1961, Anon. 1969) quote the views of James Morgan, an Aboriginal man from Coraki, who inherited “a wealth of legends and myths” from his grandfather, King Morgan. He was regarded as an “expert on North Coast dialects and mythology” (Anon 1969: 15). Some of the later

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## Feedback...

### Wianamatta

I've just received the April ANPS newsletter. My special interest was the introduction of the "Dual-Naming" of geographical features in NSW. My

application some years ago for a local Creek (South Creek) to be re-named Wianamatta triggered off a response from the Geographical Names Board to propose a Dual-Naming policy in this State (which was successful of course).

My latest news is that I spent last year on an Advisory Panel

for the Plan of Management of a newly established Regional Park on the former ADI site which runs across two LGAs (Penrith and Blacktown). As part

of the tasks we were (as advisors) asked to submit a name for the park. I had no hesitation in putting the name Wianamatta forward as the proposed name. South Creek/Wianamatta runs through this park of some 900 hectares, and of course it is situated on Wianamatta shales which is predominately the substrata of soils of the Cumberland Plain.

The draft plan of management is still open for public viewing and comment. I have already sent in my submission supporting the name (of course) and I do not believe there should be any opposition as it is (in my opinion) the most appropriate and obvious choice.

You may wish to view the DEC site ([http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/wianamatta\\_rp\\_mgmtplan\\_draft](http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/wianamatta_rp_mgmtplan_draft)). I would like to acknowledge the participation of Flavia Hodges, Susan Poetsch and Jaky Troy in the dual-naming workshop at Tranby College in Glebe; and of course the submission and preparations for the legislation was carried out by Greg Windsor and his wonderful team at the NSW Geographical Names Board.

Kind Regards,

*Ronald Bastian*  
Oxley Park (NSW)  
12 April

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## Who's Who...

### on the *Placenames Australia* committee

We've promised to feature, in each issue of our newsletter, a member of the committee. This issue, it's...

**Joyce Miles, Vice-President:** Joyce lived and researched in Europe for many years, where she analysed house names in their social context, with particular reference to the growth of suburbia. She has written three books on the subject. Since she moved to Australia she has continued her work on this topic along with research on placenames. She gives regular ABC broadcasts on house names and related topics. Her current research areas are concentrated on:

- An analysis of Australian house names—similarities and differences compared with those of Europe
- The influence of early settlers on Australian house names
- Australian house names as a source of street and placenames
- Placenames in Australia with particular reference to NSW

And Joyce, of course, is our regular quizmaster—her Placenames Puzzle normally appears on the back page, but in this issue you'll find Puzzle No. 22 on page 6.



# ... How Nimbin got its name

continued from page 1

sources (such as Johnston 1982) are obviously based, at least in part, on Morgan. But there are others (such as Hoff 2006) that seem to have arrived at a similar etymology independently.

So let us consider etymology B in detail. I list here the various meanings that have been given for the term *nyiimbuyn*, by Morgan, Johnston and Hoff, who associate the term with name of Nimbin, and by Radcliffe-Brown and Sharpe, who do not make such a connection.

## Morgan:

- 1 ““A place where dwells a man in a mountain’. A man with a long beard. He was a human being” (in Anon. 1961: 6; 1969: 15. Slightly different punctuation in the later version.)

## Johnston:

2. ““home of the little man’...refers to the mystical Aboriginal men of high degree; the wise men, the custodians of spiritual and tribal knowledge, who dwell in the mountains and hills” (1982: 3-4).
3. “a place where dwells, a man in a mountain, a wise man with a long beard; he is a human being” (1982: 4).
4. “a little man of great age and sacredness, a sort of wise man, to whom clever men (Wee-un) went for instruction in occult matters and skills. A Nyimbin dwells in a mountain and so his dwelling is sacred too” (1982: 4).

## Hoff:

5. “Little Fellow...the tribal leader in that area” (2006: 94).
6. “a short thickset man who often inhabited mountains and large rock formations” (2006: 226).
7. “a supernatural being living in a mountain” (2006: 226).

## Radcliffe-Brown:

8. “a little old man” (1929: 401, note 1)

## Sharpe:

9. “clever feller” (1995: 81).
10. “funny little fellow” (2002: 58).

The most commonly occurring elements of these attempts to define the meaning of *nyiimbuyn* are those that indicate he is male, little and mountain-dwelling. These seem to be his primary characteristics. A secondary characteristic is that he is old and/or wise.

A few of the definitions mention an association with the “clever men”, called in Bundjalung *wiyan* or *wuyan* (Sharpe 1995: 99, 101). Two of the definitions (2 and 9) assimilate the *nyiimbuyn* to the *wiyan*. But in at least the first case this appears to be a mis-reading of the information given by James Morgan. In both the articles that cite Morgan’s views on the subject, it is clear that the “clever men” sometimes needed “to consult higher authorities and those were the hermits in the mountain caves” – namely, the *nyiimbuyn* (Anon. 1969: 15; cf. Anon. 1961: 6). In other words, both the *wiyan* and the *nyiimbuyn* were involved with ““mystic powers”” (Anon. 1961: 6), but the powers of the solitary, mountain-dwelling *nyiimbuyn* were apparently more developed, in some respects, than those of the community-based *wiyan*.

Also, there is no suggestion that the *wiyan* is anything other than human. In the case of the *nyiimbuyn*, one definition (1, repeated in 3) specifies that the *nyiimbuyn* is a human being, and a number of the other definitions certainly suggest humanness. But he is *also* “supernatural” (definition 7). And the relationship between the *wiyan* and the *nyiimbuyn* was not always cordial. In what appears to be the only published narrative concerning a *nyiimbuyn*, a *wiyan* is sent to do battle with a *nyiimbuyn* in order to release a young man whom the *nyiimbuyn* has imprisoned inside a mountain (Hoff 2006: 226).

The *nyiimbuyn*’s smallness is a characteristic he has in common with other part-human, part-supernatural entities from many areas of the world, including the “little people” of British folklore and the leprechauns of Ireland. In the opinion of one folklorist, the most useful generic term for these is “fairies” (Harpur 2002: 6-7). In this connection, it is worth noting that a

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number of places a short distance to the west of Nimbin have names that include the term “fairy”. Close by the township of Kyogle is a landform called “Fairymount”; and between Kyogle and Casino is a place called “Fairy Hill”. I have been unable to find any information about the origin of these names<sup>5</sup>. (If any readers are able to assist me in this matter, I’d be grateful if they could contact me at the email address below.) It’s likely that these names are the inventions of settler culture. But, in the absence of data, I would prefer not to exclude the possibility that the “fairies” in question had some connection with the Bundjalung little people, the *nyiimbuyn*.

Finally, I want to comment on the use of the word “funny” in definition 10. This seems like an odd expression to use in connection with a being who, in the narrative already summarised above, appears to be quite dangerous. To call the *nyiimbuyn* “funny” is perhaps to suggest that he belongs to a cast of characters that can be seen slipping out of a convincing supernatural existence into the reminiscences of folklore<sup>6</sup>.

The term “funny” may also indicate a mild degree of humour, or embarrassment, or both, and there could be etymological reasons for this. In both coastal and inland dialects of Bundjalung the word *nyiim* means “anus”, “posterior” (Sharpe 1995: 80, 114; Sharpe 2002: 58, 76). There are two possible etymologies of the morpheme /bʊŋ/. In Western Bundjalung *-buuyn* is a nominal suffix meaning “typified by”, and *buuyn* is a noun meaning “wind” (Sharpe 2002: 17). In other words, it’s possible that the word *nyiimbuyn* means either “typified by the anus” or “anus-wind”. It’s hardly surprising, then, that the *nyiimbuyn* is regarded as a “funny little fellow”.

So what conclusions can be drawn from all this? I have argued above that the most plausible explanation of the name of the township of Nimbin is that it is derived from *ngumbiyn* (“camp”, “hut”, “house”). But there are a number of spectacular rock formations in the vicinity of Nimbin that could well have lent themselves to habitation by the *nyiimbuyn*. It’s unlikely that the *nyiimbuyn* gave their name directly to the town. But there were probably enough of them in the surrounding natural environment for people to be aware of their presence, and to talk about it. This may well have confused the early white settlers, who would have had difficulty distinguishing between the words *ngumbiyn* and *nyiimbuyn* (cf. Hoff 2006: 93). Over time, one

assumes, this confusion has been accepted by all parties as an important aspect of the story of how Nimbin got its name.

□ Jim Wafer

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I’m very grateful to Jim Arachne and Amanda Lissarrague for drawing my attention to many of the sources on which this article is based.

<sup>2</sup> Sharpe’s *Dictionary of Western Bundjalung* (1995) uses *ŋ* instead of *ng*, and *uh* instead of *uu*. Her *Dictionary of Coastal Bundjalung* (2002) uses the digraph *ny* rather than *yn* to represent the final consonant /ŋ/. But this does not affect the underlying phonology, which remains the same, with the following variations: between /ŋ/, /ɲ/ and /n/ as the first consonant; between /u/, /u:/ and /i/ as the first vowel; and between presence or absence of the final consonant /ŋ/.

<sup>3</sup> Sharpe actually gives different meanings for the two (dialectal) variant forms of this word. The word she spells as *nyihmbuyn* in Western Bundjalung is glossed as “clever feller” (1995: 81); and the word she spells as *nyimbuyn* in Coastal Bundjalung is glossed as “funny little fellow” (2002: 58). But, as we shall see, both meanings appear to be within the semantic range covered by this word.

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# ANPS Contributions to Queensland Database

## Dale Lehner reports:

As many of you know, I have been working with Ian Hutchings, Principal Cartographer (Place Names) for the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Water, to fill some of the gaps in their database. A few hundred ANPS entries are now available to the public on the Department's website:

<http://www.nrw.qld.gov.au/property/placenames/search>

I have listed some of our contributions below, so that you can all browse the site at your leisure. The number given in the right-hand column will appear in the webpage address line to identify each entry.

*Enter the name in the first column:*

<b>Arcadia Valley</b>	locality (bounded)	Bauhinia Shire	41568
<b>Ballon</b>	parish	Chinchilla Shire	1398
	creek	„	1399
<b>Blaxland</b>	locality (bounded)	Wambo Shire	42754
	railway stn	„	3161
<b>Cement Mills</b>	locality (bounded)	Inglewood Shire	41073
<b>Centenary Heights</b>	suburb	Toowoomba City	41692
<b>Chinaman Gully</b>	gully	Inglewood Shire	7114
	„	Millmerran Shire	7115
<b>Cobblegun Creek</b>	creek	Tara Shire	7564
<b>Daandine</b>	locality (unbounded)	Wambo Shire	9160
	parish	„	9161
<b>Dawes Range</b>	mountains	Monto Shire	38867
<b>Ducklo</b>	locality (bounded)	Wambo Shire	42757
	railway stn	„	10718
<b>Dunmore</b>	locality (bounded)	Millmerran Shire	40346
	parish	„	10876
<b>Elbow Valley</b>	locality (bounded)	Warwick Shire	43405
<b>Mount Saddletop</b>	mountain	Clifton Shire	29420
<b>Nevilton</b>	locality (bounded)	Clifton Shire	40173
	peak	„	24103
<b>Ranges Bridge</b>	locality (bounded)	Wambo Shire	42767
<b>Rodgers Creek</b>	locality (bounded)	Warwick Shire	43435
<b>Rubieslaw</b>	range	Cambooya Shire	29254
	mountain	„	29255
<b>Vignoles</b>	parish	Millmerran Shire	36039
<b>Yandilla</b>	locality (bounded)	Millmerran Shire	40366
	railway stn	„	38420

## Placenames puzzle no. 22

### Farming, Gardening and Viticulture

The clues reveal placenames connected with farming, gardening or viticulture (disregard spelling) e.g. (SA) Plant whose fruit is the grape; valley (poetic)..... Vine Vale

1. (NSW) They are used for storing hay, etc.
2. (NSW) Another term for vegetable
3. (NSW) Acreage for viticulture
4. (NSW) In former times it drew the cart; a land-locked body of water
5. (TAS) They mow lawns, grow vegetables etc; hound's bark
6. (TAS) Container for seeds or a plant
7. (TAS) Plantation of oranges, lemons, olives etc.
8. (TAS/NT) They were hanging in Babylon
9. (NT) Wheeled vehicle used by gardeners; small stream or inlet
- 10.(QLD) Roman goddess who was the guardian of orchardists
- 11.(QLD) Recently established; tract of land devoted to agriculture
- 12.(SA) Grasslands used for pasture or hay
- 13.(VIC) Large, tightly secured bundles of wool, hay etc
- 14.(VIC) Dairy herd
- 15.(VIC) A yard for livestock; elevation smaller than a mountain
- 16.(VIC) Location for shearers and balers
- 17.(VIC) Land used for the cultivation of mowing grass
- 18.(VIC) Source of wool; the hoist is famous
- 19.(VIC) Implement used to break up ploughed land
- 20.(VIC) Lawn; UK term for a unit

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(Continued from page 4)

...Nimbin

<sup>4</sup> I use the name of the compiler of this volume in my references to it. The section in which the etymology of "Nimbin" is given appears to have been written by Catherine Miles (see Johnston 1982: 7).

<sup>5</sup> There is a rather obscure clue in Sharpe's gloss of the Bundjalung name for Casino. The word is variously given as *janangmun* (2002: 69), *jenehngmam* (1995: 58, 187; 2002: 69) and *janehngmam* (2002: 45). (The *h* indicates that the preceding vowel is long). After the head-word *janehngmam* (2002: 45) the entry reads "Casino (fairy godmother)". There is no further explanation. Nor have I been able to find any information that would permit an etymological analysis of *janehngmam* (or its variants). As for the name "Kyogle": in 1930 John MacPherson published an article on NSW Aboriginal place-names in which he cites the opinions of two previous writers. S. B. Young believed the name for Kyogle came from the word for "native companion"; C. A. Irish believed it was derived from the word for "plain turkey". Mrs Young's view appears to be substantiated by Sharpe's *Dictionary of Coastal Bundjalung*, where one of the words for "brolga" (native companion) is given as *gayugul* (2002: 37, 69). The words for "turkey" do not have any phonological resemblance to "Kyogle".

<sup>6</sup> One of the symptoms of this transformation is that a supernatural being becomes a character in a children's book. This has evidently happened to the *nyiimbuyn*, who appears to have lent his name to the title and plot of such a book (Wagner 1978). It concerns a girl called Philippa, whose beach bag is adopted by a little creature called a "nimbin".



## TRENDS IN TOPONYMY conference

Check the dates in your diary and plan to attend if you can—Ian Clark and Laura Kostanski of our ANPS State Committee in Victoria have organised a most exciting placenames conference in Ballarat for the last week in November.

Turn to the back page of this issue for more details—or go direct to:

<http://www.ballarat.edu.au/business/placenames2007>

Answers: 1. Barnes 2. Legume 3. Vineyard 4. Horse Lake 5. Gardeners Bay 6. Flowerpot 7. Grove 8. The Gardens 9. Barrow Creek 10. Pomona 11. New Farm 12. Meadows 13. Bayles 14. Coves 15. Stockyard Hill 16. Woolshed 17. Heyfield 18. Sheep Hills 19. Harrow 20. Grass Flat

# Placenames Australia...

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our corporate sponsor, the Geographical Names Board of NSW—and to the Secretary of the Board, Greg Windsor. This year's newsletters could not have been published without the support of the GNB.



## Contributions

Contributions for *Placenames Australia* are welcome. Closing dates for submission are:

Please send all contributions to the Editor, David Blair, by fax to (+612) 9403 0944 or by email: <David.Blair@mq.edu.au>

Electronic submissions are preferred, and photographic or other illustrations are greatly appreciated.

31 January for the March issue

31 July for the September issue

30 April for the June issue

31 October for the December issue

# Trends in Toponymy:

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