

## IAN D CLARK

# James Dawson's intervention in the naming of the Maroondah aqueduct

In an early history of Melbourne's water supply, EG Ritchie discussed the Maroondah aqueduct and confirmed its change of name from Watts to Maroondah when the aqueduct was brought into use in February 1891.<sup>1</sup> Ritchie noted that in the early 1880s, authorities recognised 'a large new supplementary scheme was a vital necessity for the rapidly growing population, and surveys for the purpose of tapping the Watts River and its tributaries near Healesville were actively prosecuted'.<sup>2</sup> In 1886, construction started on an aqueduct for this purpose. It was completed and officially opened in February 1891, when the name of the river and system was changed to 'Maroondah'.

Likewise, Tony Dingle and Carolyn Rasmussen in their centenary history of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works discussed the completion of the Watts River works in early 1891 and noted that the 'name of the river and the catchment was changed to Maroondah'.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere does either history discuss the reasons for the change of name or the agency behind it. The purpose of this article is to reveal that James Dawson was, in all likelihood, responsible for the change of name from Watts to Maroondah, and to contextualise this in terms of his strident advocacy for Aboriginal interests, including Aboriginal placenames, and his association with the upper Yarra, which began in 1840 when he first arrived in Victoria and established a station on the Yarra near Anderson's Creek.

### The Watts River scheme

The *Age* reported on the scheme to extend Melbourne's water supply on 8 February 1881:

Let us come now to the Watts scheme. The Watts is one of the tributaries of the Yarra and enters that river at Healesville. Its water is totally different from Yan Yean – clear bright and free from an earthy taste. To judge from the rapidity with which soap lathers in it (a capital bath is to be had in the river at Fernshaw at the back of the hotel garden) the Watts water is soft but compared with the Yan Yean it is a little hard ... Analysts assure us that Yan Yean, in spite of its colour and taste, is perfectly wholesome and the comparative freedom of the population from typhoid and kindred fevers bears out the statement. For all that, the public likes its water clear and sweet and the Watts is the very thing we want. From the Yarra we shall never get a water supply; at Healesville its level is below that of Preston reservoir and for a long distance above Healesville it traverses an unbroken course of alluvial flats. The Watts on the other hand is a mountain stream and until it reaches the Yarra flats runs down a stony bed ... At the Watts both the present and the future wants of Melbourne have been thought of. To obtain more than 24 million gallons per 24 hours, it will be necessary to build a dam and store water ... The Watts scheme has been planned on the supposition that the Yan Yean may be superseded. The first portion of the work – i.e., the 21 million gallon scheme – will take five years to execute ... It is assumed that the Watts water will be sufficient of itself to supply Melbourne for many years to come ... The construction of this dam, the duplication of the syphons, and the enlargement of the open channels &c., will increase the total outlay as estimated to [be] £985,000.<sup>4</sup>

### James Dawson's intervention in the naming of the Watts River scheme

For James Dawson, the 77-year-old Western District<sup>5</sup> identity with a long history of passionate action in support of Aboriginal interests, the article on the proposed Watts River scheme was provocative. He sent a missive to the editor of the *Argus* in February 1881 protesting the scheme being named after the Watts River. He advised that he had contacted Donald Ryrie, who had first squatted at Yering with his brother Alexander Ryrie and James Graham in 1837<sup>6</sup> and learned from him that the river was named after an assigned convict in their employ. Dawson wanted to replace names such as these – which he considered to be tinged with the blood of convicts and rebels – with 'native names'. Dawson suggested that someone should appeal to the Aborigines at



Left: James Dawson. Photograph by Johnstone, O'Shannessy & Co in 'City of Melbourne Jubilee of the Incorporation of the City 1842-1892', Pictures Collection H2998/842

Right: Henry Dawson, Aboriginal Australian from the Western District, Victoria. J Harvey, carte-de-visite, c. 1868. Pictures Collection H32768

Coranderk and obtain the native name from them, as had been done in the earlier naming of the Yan Yean. Dawson's letter read:

I trust that you will permit me, as an old colonist, to record my protest against the further application of 'Watts' to a stream which is destined to form the fountain head of pure water for the supply of Melbourne, the origin of which name very few people know, and which ought not to be perpetuated on any account. Several years since the public must have been gratified by the efforts of the then Ministry, and particularly by the exertions of the Hon Robert Ramsay, to substitute native names for such as 'Cut throat Gully', 'Murderer's Creek', and many others equally calculated to impress the outer world with the idea that we are still strongly tinged with the blood of convicts and rebels. With a view to the partial removal of this unenviable notoriety I made inquiry into the origin of the name of the 'Watts' and Mr Donald Ryrie informed me that when he and his brothers first occupied Yering - 44 years

since – they established a heifer station on a fine stream on the opposite side of the Yarra Yarra, and placed it under the charge of an assigned servant named Watts, who had been transported to Botany Bay for life. Hence the name of Watts Creek. Mr Ryrie also informed me that a stream called the Badger Creek took its name from one of his packhorses – the ‘Badger’ – which got bogged in it, and so thoroughly that it had to be pulled out with ropes. May I suggest that the aborigines of Coranderrk should be appealed to, and a local name obtained from them and applied to the proposed reservoir, as was done in the instance of the ‘Yan Yean’, which means in some native dialects a ‘pond or lagoon’.<sup>7</sup>

‘Cut Throat Gully’ and ‘Murderer’s Creek’ are placenames in the Camperdown district, but I have not been able to learn more about Dawson’s comment that they were changed to ‘native names’ due to the efforts of the politician Robert Ramsay. The origins of the name ‘Yan Yean’ are treated by the authorities/sources listed in Appendix A. Dawson’s gloss is not correct, however, in terms of the Woiwurrung language that was spoken in the Melbourne district; in this case he is mistaking Yan Yean for baan-baan as a definition of a ‘pond or lagoon’.

### James Dawson’s association with the upper Yarra district

Having lived on the upper Yarra in the early 1840s, Dawson retained some affinity with this district, and was affronted by the possibility of the name of an assigned convict being conferred on an important scheme for supplying water for metropolitan Melbourne.

Dawson (1806–1900) hailed from Bonnytown, near Linlithgow, Scotland. He arrived in Melbourne on 2 May 1840, with his wife Joan Alexander Park, his nephew Patrick Mitchell, and George and Penelope Selby and their two children. With his wife, Dawson spent the first four years in the colony as a farmer and pastoralist in Port Phillip, near Anderson’s Creek on the Yarra then, from 1844, at Kangatong station in the Port Fairy district, and later he settled near Camperdown.

George Augustus Robinson, the chief protector of the Aborigines of the Port Phillip Protectorate, met Dawson on his run on the Yarra River on 29 August 1840. Robinson and Assistant Protector William Thomas were undertaking a short tour of Aboriginal camping places and European stations along the Yarra upstream as far as the Ryrie brothers’ station Yering. Robinson noted in his journal that the Dawsons were from Edinburgh, Scotland, and that Mrs Dawson was the niece of the celebrated traveller Mungo Park. The station, which had formerly belonged to Alexander Scott, adjoined James Anderson’s

station at Yarra Bight. As it was dark, Robinson requested of Dawson and Selby lodgings for the night, but was refused as they did not have the room, and they had two ladies living with them. Robinson considered them ill-natured and bores and he believed that they had no idea that he was the chief protector. The following day, Dawson, after Thomas had revealed his and Robinson's identities to him, regretted that he did not have the room to accommodate them, but invited Robinson and Thomas to honour him by joining them for breakfast the following morning. On 31 August Robinson and Thomas had breakfast with Dawson and Selby and their wives and children.<sup>8</sup>

In correspondence dated 26 December 1840, Penelope Selby explained to her grandparents that she and her family were 'not in partnership with but on the same place with Mr & Mrs Dawson'. The letter is headed 'Station on the Yarra Yarra' and she described it as being situated 'about twenty five miles from Melbourne'.<sup>9</sup> Presumably this is 'Bonnytown', near Anderson's Creek, on the Yarra Yarra where Dawson was based from May 1840–43;<sup>10</sup> later he and George Selby were in partnership at Corhanwarrabul No. 3, near Dandenong, from 1841–42, before moving to the Western District in 1844 to take up Kangatong. Thus Dawson spent at least three years on the Yarra with the Woiwurrung. It was, therefore, part of his personal history in Victoria and, being passionate about using Aboriginal placenames, he couldn't forego the opportunity of ensuring that the name 'Watts River', which to him was a placename of some opprobrium, was not used to name the proposed waterworks.

Dawson lived at Kangatong station, on the Moyne River, east of Macarthur, from 1844 until 1866. During this time he and his family developed intimate relationships with the Aboriginal people from the country between the Hopkins River and Portland. After leaving Kangatong, the Dawsons lived in various residences in Melbourne and then rented a property, 'Wuurong' near Camperdown in 1874.<sup>11</sup> Dawson's daughter, Isabella, married William A Taylor and they purchased a portion of Wuurong and built the home known as Renny Hill, Camperdown.

In 1876 Dawson was appointed local guardian of the Aborigines in the Camperdown district, and cared for a small number of elderly Aboriginal people who were allowed to live in their traditional country rather than be forced to relocate to the Framlingham settlement near Warrnambool. In 1881 Dawson was responsible for five elderly Aboriginal people: Camperdown George, Camperdown Charlie and his wife, Old Tom, and Old Tom's carer (or 'keeper') Robin Hood. Dawson's role as local guardian ended in 1883 when the last Aboriginal person in the district, Camperdown George, died.

A recent examination of Dawson's advocacy notes that, as well as being an advocate for, and guardian of, Aboriginal people, Dawson was a commissioner of artworks, an animal rights spokesman, and an environmental preservationist.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Dawson was an avid letter writer, writing many under his own name, but also using aliases such as 'The Australian' and 'Giff-Gaff' – the latter being British dialect for an exchange of words, banter, or *repartee*: 'Dawson was also keen to interrogate the morality of pastoral wealth accumulation on the back of Aboriginal disenfranchisement'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1882, Dawson visited his native Scotland, and returned to Victoria in 1884. One of the reasons for his overseas trip was to meet with the colonial secretary in London and discuss recent massacres of Aboriginal people in Queensland by black troopers.

In terms of the drivers of Dawson's interests it has been contended that, although we can see glimpses of a 'stern and moral Presbyterian Scot', he was also a man of scientific bent, who was keen to combine his scientific curiosity with his advocacy for Aboriginal interests in an attempt to expose ignorance and misinformation about Aboriginal culture and society. He was dedicated to exposing injustice and the maltreatment of Aboriginal people.<sup>14</sup> When the journalist 'The Vagabond' (John Stanley James/Julian Thomas) met Dawson in Camperdown in early 1885, he had been pre-warned by an old Camperdown citizen, M'Nicoll, that from Dawson, 'Fine tales ye'll hear about the blacks – the murdering wretches'.<sup>15</sup> The Vagabond made the following assessment of Dawson's writing and his views:

Mr Dawson is one of those liberal-minded men who can agree to disagree with an honest critic. His book, interesting and valuable though it is, I consider to be essentially special pleading. He loved the natives, and laments their disappearance from the land. I do not. I would sooner see my own race settled around Camperdown than such interesting specimens of black humanity as are photographed in Mr Dawson's book.<sup>16</sup>

I respect and admire Mr Dawson very much, and wish he had as much love for his own race as for the aborigines. Are there not quite enough white lambs in the world to feed and succour without mourning dead black ones.<sup>17</sup>

So, in 1881, having learned of the proposed waterworks, Dawson was motivated to intervene in the process and recommend the use of an Aboriginal name for the scheme. Dawson was acquainted with his neighbouring squatters in the upper Yarra district, and he knew the Ryrie brothers from Yering and obtained information about local placenames from them. But this was no isolated example of Dawson expressing interest in Indigenous placenames.



The Weir, Watts River, 1909. Frank Ernest Allen, glass lantern slide. Pictures Collection H2009.29/106

Formal opening of the Maroondah Weir by the Governor of Victoria, the Earl of Hopetoun, 18 February 1891. Image from Sally Symonds, *Healesville: History in the Hills*, 1982, p. 57

In 1881 he published a major ethnography of the Aboriginal people of western Victoria and, in that work, he made his views clear about the recording and retention of Indigenous placenames.

### James Dawson's interest in Indigenous placenames

In his book *The Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*, Dawson included an appendix on Western District Aboriginal placenames:

It is deeply to be regretted that the opportunity for securing the native names of places has, in many districts, gone for ever. In most localities the aborigines are either dead or too young to have learned the names which their fathers gave to the various features of the country; and in those parts where a few old men are still to be met with, the white inhabitants, generally speaking, take no interest in the matter. With a very few worthy exceptions, they have done nothing to ascertain and record even those names which appertain to their own properties. How much more interesting would have been the map of the colony of Victoria had this been attended to at an earlier period of its history.

The following are the native names of some conspicuous places in the Western District, and, as far as could be ascertained, their meanings. It must be noticed that rivers have not the same name from their source to the sea. The majority of Australian streams cease to flow in summer, and are then reduced to a chain of pools or waterholes, all of which, with their intermediate fords, have distinguishing names. The river which connects these waterholes in winter has no name. Every river, however, which forms one continuous stream during both summer and winter has a name which is applied to its whole length. For example, Taylor's River, or Mount Emu Creek, is called 'Tarnpirr', 'flowing water', from its source in Lake Burrumbeet to its junction with the Hopkins. At the same time, every local reach in these rivers has a distinguishing name.<sup>18</sup>

Artist and writer Hume Nisbet, who lived in Australia from 1865 until 1872, and returned in 1886 and again in 1895, was also outspoken on social issues and deplored the maltreatment of Aboriginal people. In his *A Colonial Tramp: Travels and Adventures in Australia and New Guinea*, Nisbet recounted a conversation that he had with his host, James Dawson, when he was visiting the Camperdown district:

Why do you call this place Camperdown? I asked him; for the fact that the land must have had characteristic native names and the incongruity of



such a name for such a district struck me forcibly, when they had so much originality to pick and choose from. Why? I had hit my friend in a sore place, or his bright blue eyes blazed out with wrath as he answered: 'Why are all our finest and most poetic native names turned into meaningless English ones? Because some idiot is appointed by Government to rush over the country and give names to places already named properly. The fellow who called our town Camperdown came here in a hurry, pulled out his Bradshaw, and on the first page he opened at random was Camperdown, so he straightway christened it, without rhyme or reason, by that name.<sup>19</sup> And would you believe it, the native name of the township is "Warrnatts". M'Arthur's hill over there is called "Meenin'gnurt". That point of land over there on Lake Bullen Merri is called "Wuurna-wee-wheetch," or the "Home of the Swallow"; the country is called "Kirk maering," "Place of Wild Dogs". There are a hundred good titles to pick and choose from – names which signify something – and yet they say Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and Camperdown, to confuse the traveller and general reader with old names which have neither euphony nor meaning'. I could not help agreeing with my friend in the spirit of his complaint, for this hideous, or commonplace naming of colonial places is one of the few shortcomings which always jars upon my nerves – this and the 'ringing' and destroying of the gum trees by the settlers.<sup>20</sup>

### James Dawson's visit to Coranderrk

Some 31 months after his first letter on the subject, Dawson wrote again to the *Argus*, this time from Glasgow, on the issue of the naming of the Watts River scheme. In the intervening period he had visited the Coranderrk Aboriginal settlement to undertake research, which he had recommended in his earlier letter, into the Aboriginal names of the various localities associated with the water scheme. No doubt he was looking forward to re-acquainting himself with people that he may not have seen since the early 1840s. But, before he arrived at Coranderrk, he visited the Government Water Department in Melbourne's Treasury buildings and spoke with the relevant official in charge of the water scheme. Dawson explained the purpose of his visit to Coranderrk and expressed his wish for an Aboriginal name to be conferred on the waterworks. Dawson indicated that he was willing to meet all costs associated with his field trip. He secured a map from this official, and promised to return to him the results of his research. The official indicated to Dawson that he approved of his endeavours and promised to do all he could to meet his views.

At Coranderrk, Dawson met with the elders, some of whom could remember him from when he lived on the Yarra in the early 1840s. Henry

Dawson, an Aboriginal from the Port Fairy district, and named after James Dawson, facilitated the interaction between Dawson and the Coranderrk leaders. Henry Dawson was born at Kangatong, where he worked for James Dawson, and he married at Dawson's Wuurong property in 1876.<sup>21</sup>

Dawson's letter read in part:

Having observed in *The Argus* of the 4th of June an article on the necessity for an additional supply of water to Melbourne from the Yarra mountains, perhaps you will kindly allow an enthusiast in the preservation of native names a small space in *The Argus* earnestly to protest against the application of the term 'Watts' to the proposed new water supply. I base my protest on the principle that we ought not to perpetuate names which are likely to bring a slur on the colony, such as that of naming our finest water source after an old convict. We have already too many instances of the same sort, which old colonists can only look upon with supreme contempt and disgust, and why add another to the list. Watts, from whom the 'Watts' takes its name, was sentenced to be hanged at the yard arm of a man of war for striking his superior officer, but had his sentence commuted to transportation for life to Botany Bay. On arrival there he was assigned to the good old country gentlemen, the Messrs Ryrrie, of New South Wales, who brought him over to Yering, on the Yarra Yarra, and afterwards entrusted him with the charge of a heifer station on the stream known by his name, in which he was afterwards found drowned – hence the name of the Watts.

With a hope to avert the disgrace of having the principal source of pure water for the supply of the capital named after a man who was condemned to be hanged, I resolved before leaving Australia to visit Coranderrk, and ascertain from my old Yarra aboriginal friends of 40 years ago, the names of the different localities connected with the proposed water scheme. Furnished ... with a fine map, I went up to Coranderrk, and had a meeting with the principal old aborigines, who fortunately were then gathered from all quarters to pick hops.

Some of the old men remembered having seen me 40 years previously, and my inquiries were also considerably helped by Henry Dawson, a pure native of the Port Fairy district, for many years one of my faithful shepherds. On showing the map to several of the more intelligent blacks, and explaining the purpose of my visit, I had no difficulty ascertaining the names and the meanings of many places, parts of the River Yarra and its tributaries, and when I referred to the proposed water supply, they at once said they knew the valley selected for the dam, and could take me to it, as some of them accompanied the 'white fellows' who examined it long ago. After some conversation amongst themselves, an old man, apparently an authority, told me that the place selected

by the surveying party for the embankment was called Marroondah by the natives, a name applied to the locality inclusive of the neighbouring mountain, the valley, and the stream, but he remarked that the stupid 'white fellow' had changed Marroondah into 'Mount Monday'. Having finished my mission to Coranderrk, I handed to the head of the Government Water Department, the chart filled in with the names of places and other information procurable from the very small number of old aborigines to be depended upon, and with it I expressed a hope that the department would discard the name of 'Watts' and adopt Marroondah, which would not only be no discredit to the colony, but a token of respect for the aborigines. I now trust that this letter may be in time to draw public attention to the matter.<sup>22</sup>

With the letter he attached a memo from his notebook about the origins of place and river names (these are included here in Appendix B). Unfortunately 'Maroondah' or 'Marroondah' is an opaque toponym – its meaning is not known. It may derive from the widespread Kulin word for thunder 'marndar'. All the other names on Dawson's list have known meanings.

### Completion and opening of the Maroondah Waterworks, 18 February 1891

The Governor of Victoria, the Earl of Hopetoun, officiated at the formal opening of the Watts River scheme. The Earl led the contingent of dignitaries on horseback from Healesville station to the weir: 'At the opening ceremony His Excellency released the controls and water surged through the channel. The name of the river was changed from Watts to Maroondah, the name by which the local Aborigines knew the area. After the ceremony, lunch was held in a marquee and champagne flowed freely.'<sup>23</sup>

Dawson was in Victoria in February 1891, but it is not known if he attended the official ceremony. In his two letters on the subject Dawson had made his views clear – he believed in the principle that placenames should not be perpetuated that were likely to bring a slur on the colony – in particular names that were strongly tinged with the blood of old convicts and rebels. His wish for the name to be changed from Watts River to Maroondah was realised at the official opening of the weir. His efforts in researching Aboriginal placenames in the Coranderrk district and his deliberate interventions in the naming of the new waterworks were successful. Although the Earl of Hopetoun announced that the Watts River was going to be named Maroondah River, and the newly opened weir, Maroondah Weir, only the latter name was sustained. Ultimately, however, Dawson didn't get everything he had hoped for – the surname of the assigned convict, George Watts, is still associated with the stream in which he drowned.