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A note on 'James Dawson's intervention in the naming of the Maroondah aqueduct'

A recent issue of the *La Trobe Journal*¹ published my article on James Dawson's intervention in the naming of the Maroondah aqueduct. In that article, I put forward the argument that Dawson, the noted Western District advocate for Aboriginal interests, was in all likelihood, responsible for the change of name from the original Watts to Maroondah. To that end, I was unsure if Dawson attended the official opening of the Maroondah Waterworks on 18 February 1891. Finally, I was unable to provide a clear meaning of the name 'Maroondah', though I suggested that it may derive from the widespread Kulin word for thunder, 'marndar'.

Since my article appeared, I have come across two newspaper articles that confirm, categorically, that Dawson was primarily responsible for the name change, and that he was present at the opening ceremony; and one of the articles provides an interpretation of the meaning of 'Maroondah'. In alerting its readers to the opening of the Watts River waterworks, the *Camperdown Chronicle* reported that Dawson was one of the guests invited to the ceremony. It also noted that there was to be a change of name from Watts to Maroondah. The *Chronicle* explained the circumstances of the name change by referring to the final report of the Water Supply Board:

During the progress of the work known as the Watts' River scheme a circumstance arose whereby the name of Watts was brought under the notice of the board by Mr. James Dawson, an old colonist, who occupied a cattle station on the Yarra in 1840. From correspondence with that gentleman it appears the name of 'Watts River' was adopted owing to the suicide by drowning in a mountain stream, of an assigned servant named Watts, employed by Messrs. Ryrie Bros, of Yeerang out the Yarra, in 1837. The native name is Maroondah and the board are of opinion that the present is a fitting time for introducing the subject. They therefore request that the name of the Watts' aqueduct and the works generally in that neighbourhood may be changed for the future, and be known by the more euphonious appellation of Maroondah.²

In announcing the opening of the water scheme, the *Argus* also confirmed Dawson's agency in the name change.³ The *Argus* considered that 'Maroondah as a name suggests aboriginal delight. It is impossible to believe that such a euphonious word could have been applied to anything unlovely, and the river

is certainly one of the most beautiful in the colony'. It then reported, however, some correspondence with the superintendent of Coranderrk that revealed the meaning of the name Maroondah and asserted that it was neither a local word nor the traditional name of the Watts River:

Recently Mr. Bernard Smith, being desirous of securing a euphonious native name for a house, wrote to Mr. Shaw, the superintendent of the aboriginal station at Coranderrk, asking that the meaning of the word 'Maroondah' might be ascertained from the natives. Mr. Shaw has replied stating that the meaning of 'Maroondah' is 'throwing' and that it was not the name of the river. Wm. Barak, the sole survivor of the Yarra tribe, informed him that the proper name of the Watts is 'Burngothalk', which means rotten log or rotten wood, and it was so called on account of the large quantity of dead timber on its banks. The word 'Maroondah' was not in the vocabulary of the Yarra tribe, but was introduced from the Parrapa tribe, which inhabited the Loddon district. Other natives at Coranderrk gave the name of the Watts as 'Pumburngalk', but they agree with Barak that 'Maroondah' means 'throwing' and that the word was not used by the Yarra tribe. Mr. Dawson is, however, an authority not to be lightly set aside, and he occupied a cattle station on the Yarra in the year 1840.⁴

Unfortunately, Dawson does not reveal the names of the Aboriginal people he met with at Coranderrk in 1881 or early 1882, but he is clear that one 'old man, apparently an authority, told me that the place selected by the surveying party for the embankment was called Maroondah by the natives'.⁵ The likely source of Dawson's information is Benjamin 'Lanky' Manton, a Wati-Wati speaker from Swan Hill, whose mother was Barababaraba. Another possible source for the information is John Terrick, who belonged to Barababaraba.

The information provided by Barak and others to Superintendent Shaw that the Woiwurrung name for the Watts River was 'Burngothalk' or an equivalent, meaning 'rotten log or rotten wood', is consistent with the information published⁶ by Dawson and other primary sources.⁷ Dawson was led to believe that the name of Mount Monda, near Maroondah Reservoir, was a corruption of Maroondah and that it applied to a particular part of Watts Creek. I am unable to confirm Barak's gloss on the meaning of Maroondah. Barababaraba language is practically identical with the language of its north-west neighbour, Wembawemba, however, I am unable to find Maroondah in word lists from either language. In Barry Blake's (2014) unpublished list⁸ of Kulin vocabulary, he analyses *muruma* as the Wati-Wati word for 'to throw', and this is the closest that I can come to Barak's gloss.