Jim Crow

An exploration of the origins, use and connotations of the name in the Upper Loddon area, as part of a name restoration process

9 September, 2019

Professor Barry Golding AM
b.golding@federation.edu.au
See also: 'Beyond Contact' page via: www.barrygoanna.com

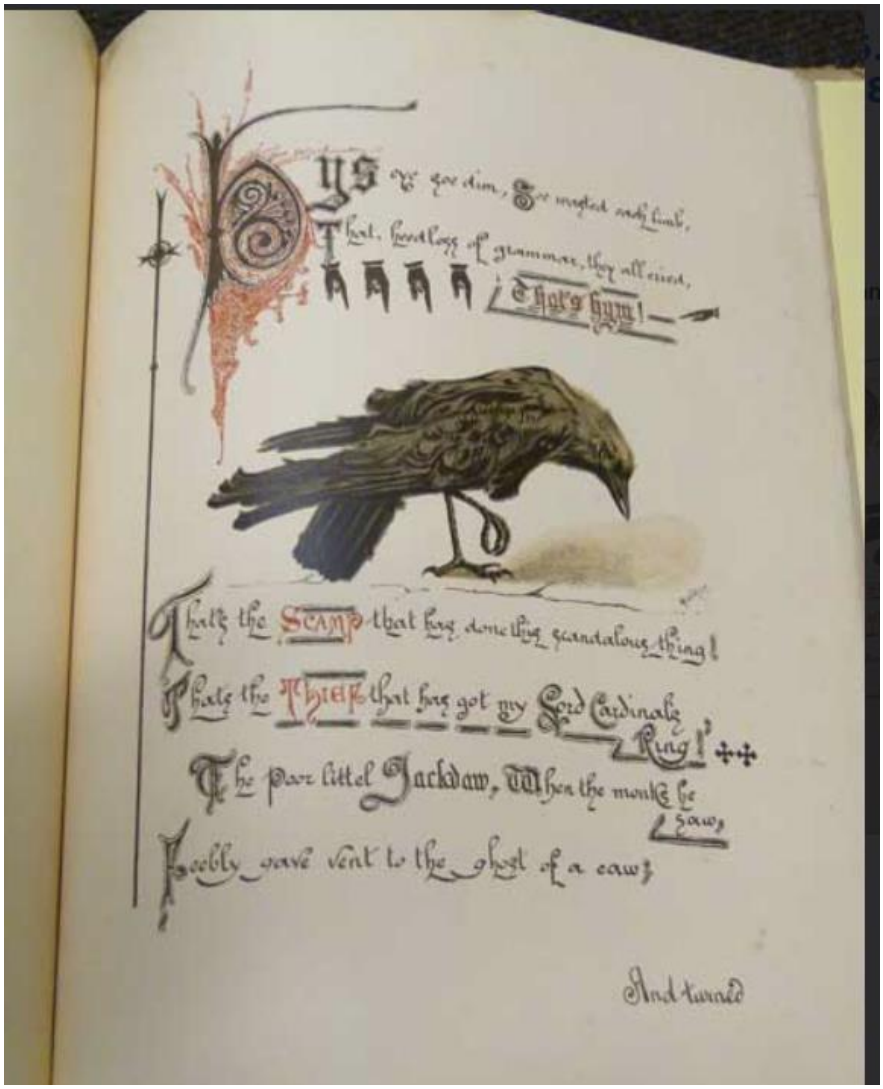

Illustration from 'Jackdaw of Rheims': Thomas Ingoldsby poem from the 1830s, E. M. Jessop, Illustrator, republished 1890

Preamble

The creek that runs north from near Hepburn to the Loddon River in southern Dja Dja Wurrung country has been referred to as the 'Jim Crow Creek' since the early 1840s.

'Jim Crow Creek' is a 26km long ephemeral creek, draining 123 square km of country, formed by the confluence of Sailors Creek and Spring Creek at Breakneck Gorge in Hepburn Regional Park, two kilometers northwest of Hepburn. A Streamside Reserve near Franklinford also shares the same name.

The creek flows in a northerly direction from steep, forested gullies to undulating grazing land and alluvial flats. It enters the Loddon River below the Guildford Plateau at Strangways, 8 km downstream of Guildford. As with other significant features in the local landscape, it had a previous Dja Dja Wurrung name.

Mount Franklin peak was called *Lalgambook* and its crater and the area around it was *Larnebarramul* (literally nest of the Emu. The peak was widely referred to as 'Jim Crow Hill' until the mid-1840s before it was renamed 'Mt Franklin. The nearby Aboriginal Protectorate (1841-1849) area was sometimes referred to as 'Jim Crow'; the traditional owners were often referred to as the 'Jim Crow Tribe' and in later decades of the 1800s, the gold diggings became known as the 'Jim Crow Diggings'.

Why change the name?

The Dja Dja Wurrung traditional owners have requested to change the name of the Creek on account of the racially offensive connotations of the term 'Jim Crow', as elaborated later in this document. Both the Hepburn Shire and Mount Alexander Shires are committed, as part of their commitments to Indigenous Reconciliation, to put in place a community consultation process to effect a change in consultation with the local community.

The formal request to the Hepburn Shire to begin and lead a consultation process on these grounds was made via by the Hepburn Shire Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Community Reference Group at their 21 August 2019 meeting. This consultation process is a necessary and important part of any process that might lead to the name 'Jim Crow' being changed in relation to the Creek, and to restoration on a more appropriate name acceptable to the traditional owners.

This document seeks to 'dig towards the bottom' of how a racist and derogatory term 'Jim Crow', that originated in the US during the 1830s, came to be applied to a delightful local creek in Australia by the 1840s. It also makes a case, in the light of all that has transpired in this landscape since squatters arrived in the late 1830s, for restoring a less racially offensive and more appropriate name to the Creek, with a preference for an appropriate Dja Dja Wurrung name.

There has been a lively debate in the Daylesford and Castlemaine communities in recent years about the desirability of renaming, a process perhaps better thought of as *restoring* an original name for Jim Crow Creek in consultation with the local community, including the Dja Dja Wurrung traditional owners.

There are recent, similar precedents for removing racially offensive terms in the Australian landscape. A former identically named 'Jim Crow Mountain' and National Park north east of Rockhampton in Queensland was legally restored to *Baga* in May 2018 by the Department of Natural Resources in Queensland in collaboration with the Darumbal Aboriginal people and the local community. There are other instances in

Australia where similarly racist place names, such as 'Nigger Creek' have been officially expunged in consultation with the community.

What is the origin of 'Jim Crow'?

Slavery had been practiced in British America from early colonial times and was legal in all thirteen American colonies at the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Slavery lasted in about half the American States until 1865, when it was prohibited nationally by the 13th Amendment.

John Hepburn and other squatters arrived with their families and sheep in the now Hepburn Shire in the late 1830s. In 1830 America's population was around 13 million, of whom around two million (15 per cent) were still black African slaves to white American masters.

In the early 1830s, a white actor Thomas Dartmouth, "Daddy" Rice" was propelled to stardom for performing minstrel routines as the fictional "Jim Crow," a racist caricature of a clumsy, dim-witted black slave. Rice's minstrel act featuring the song '*Jump Jim Crow*' proved a massive hit among white audiences. Rice toured around the United States and also in Great Britain. As the show's popularity spread, "Jim Crow" became a widely used, racist and derogatory term for black people in America and in several other colonial nations and territories.

Rice claimed to have developed the Jim Crow character after he saw an elderly black man singing a song called "Jump Jim Crow" in Louisville, Kentucky. Lucille Quinlan's 1967 biography of John Hepburn (*Here my Home*) cites Edgar Morrison's suggestion that the name and nature of the winding creek might somehow be connected to the "Hop a little, stop a little, jump Jim Crow" lines from the song. This is one of several possibilities, each of which goes back to this negative 1830s racial stereotype of black people as black 'Jim Crows'.

The Jim Crow character Rice popularised amongst the American white population was in turn transferred to the name of the laws that enforced racial segregation in the South of the US, between the end of the Reconstruction Era in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. These *Jim Crow Laws* followed the 1800–1866 *Black Codes*, which had previously restricted the civil rights and civil liberties of African Americans with no pretence of equality.

In practical terms, the *Jim Crow Laws*, that became part of several US state constitutions, mandated the segregation of public schools, public places, and public transportation, and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains for whites and blacks.

A 'Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia' at Ferris State University in Michigan opened in the US in 2013, telling the story of Jim Crow in a broader context for visitors to the museum: see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf7jAF2Tk40.

A comprehensive explanation of how the Jim Crow laws evolved in the US is found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_gOtZ–4WE.
Each of these YouTube clips come with a strong warning that some people might find the content and the term 'Jim Crow' very offensive. The material is reproduced in the US in order to help inform and educate Americans about their history as part of their own national reconciliation process.

How & when was 'Jim Crow' transferred to an Australian Creek?

In recent decades the voluminous personal diaries of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District (1838-1849) have been transcribed and published. A curiously worded entry by George Robinson on 14 Feb 1840, whilst he was staying with John Hepburn and family in the lee of Mount Kooroocheang near present day Smeaton, mentions '… a hill Mr Hepburn calls Jem Crow because of the small hollows about it'. On face value, given Robinson's dreadful writing and less than perfect spelling, I had previously assumed that this was simply his misspelling of 'Jim Crow'. Until very recently I knew of no obvious association between the superficial appearance of the mountain and Jim Crow.

It was the mountain *Lalgambook* (later renamed Mt Franklin) that appears to have been dubbed 'Jem (or Jim) Crow' first, most likely by John Hepburn. It was certainly before Robinson's diary note of February 1840, and after his arrival in the Kooroocheang landscape in April 1838.

Edward Parker, later to become Assistant Protector of Aborigines at the Loddon Aboriginal Protectorate (near present day Franklinford) used the term 'Jim Crow' when referring to the mountain in his report on 22 September 1839, the earliest written reference I can find. It appears that the first time George Robinson actually met John Hepburn was three days later in Melbourne, writing on 25 September 1839 that Hepburn said that '… the blacks are very numerous in his neighbourhood. They had killed his sheep and all but strangled a shepherd. Believes they were Port Phillip natives. … Said the native women and children fled to his station for protection.'

George Robinson first mentioned 'Captain Hepburn' in his diary six months before whilst Hepburn was visiting Melbourne on 15 March 1839, writing that Reverend Gill, the first Anglican Minister in Melbourne had told him that Hepburn said that '… the blacks had frequently attacked his station, generally in his absence. Said the natives had guns with them'.

Given John Hepburn's active, firm and sometimes forceful exclusion of local Dja Dja Wurrung (Aboriginal) people from the lands and waterways he chose for his expansive Smeaton Hill sheep run from April 1838, I assume that using the term 'Jim Crow' would have then had a negative and derogatory connotation for Hepburn.

I have also assumed John Hepburn's knowledge before 1840 of the importance of and the active Aboriginal ceremonial use of the Mt Franklin (*Lalgambook*) mountain and particularly the *Larnebarramul* ('nest of the emu') crater below the rim of the crater would have further cemented Hepburn's justification for calling the area and mountain 'Jim Crow'. Neither of these assumptions is negated by what follows, but they hopefully help to further inform the debate about possible restoration of a more appropriate name of the Jim Crow Creek.

Alternative explanations about Jumcra

There are several alternative explanations for the naming of Jim Crow Hill. I am indebted to the 'Jim Crow Hill' explanation provided by Ian D. Clark in *Indigenous and*

Minority Placenames: Australian and International Perspectives (Clarke, 2014), the www.yandoit.net web site and Bill McClenaghan for the source of some of this information and alternative argument.

There are claims two of Alexander Mollison's shepherds coined the name 'Jim Crow' when they established a western extension of Mollison's run in 1840, and that Mollison wanted to change the name to 'Jumcra'.

Alexander Mollison, in a letter to his sister Jane on 30 April 1840 told her a version of the naming. "One of my finest sheep runs is nicknamed 'Jim Crow' and a young settler, not very refined in his ideas, and who stutters painfully, amuses me when I chance to meet him, he pertinaciously reporting, '*Ah it was m-m-m-m-me that called it J-J-J-Jim Crow'. I have Australianised it into Jumcra but with little effect.*"

According to Saxton (*Victorian place names and their origin*, 1907: 36, cited in Clark, 2014, p.260), Jim Crow Hill was named '… by Capt John Hepburn. Capt. Bacchus, who accompanied him, asked what name should the ranges have, and Hepburn replied: Jim Crow, after a popular song'. As early as 1967 Edgar Morrison (1967, *Frontier life in the Loddon Protectorate*, p. 41, also cited in Clark, 2014, p.260) noted that the origin of the name 'Jim Crow' has intrigued many for a long time.

Some local historians believe (without supporting evidence) that *jumcra* is the name of a former 'king' of the local 'Loddon tribe of Aborigines'. Whilst Aboriginal Nations and Clans did not have kings or chiefs as more widely understood, they certainly had Elders that commanded a similar respect and leadership or knowledge amongst their people, which may have been witnessed, viewed or dubbed by colonists as 'kings' or 'chiefs'. In many districts, colonist, gave European names to individuals in place of their Aboriginal names that were sometimes deliberately unflattering, including 'Jim Crow'.

While there were Dja Dja Wurrung Clan groups living around the mountain now referred to as Mount Franklin, the Dja Dja Wurrung Nation's country extended beyond the Loddon catchment to include the Avoca and other north flowing rivers. Etymologically, the term "jim crow" was later used for various implements, as for example, a "jem/my", a miniature form of a bent crow (bar) and, somehow, the idea of bending or twisting seems to be implicit in its derivation. A device for bending iron bars was at one time termed a "jim crow".

According to Blake (1977: 133, *Place names of Victoria, p.133*), overlander Alexander Mollison's records list the district as 'Jumcra', 'Aboriginal name for which meaning not traced; "Jim Crow" was minstrel song from U.S.A. 1835'.

Randell (1979, *Pastoral settlement in Northern Victoria, Vol. II,* p.222) suggested that Mollison took up two stations in the vacant land immediately west of his Coliban station in early May 1840, naming the Loddon run 'Jumcra, probably an aboriginal name. The second run was called Boughyards. The men soon corrupted the first name into Jim Crow'. John Tully (1997: 87, *Djadja Wurrung language of Central Victoria*) supports the view that Jumcra was corrupted to Jim Crow, again without primary evidence.

Norm Darwin, a Daylesford local historian wrote a book published as *Gold'n Spa* in 2005 that included an account of Mollison's extension of his run beyond his 'western boundary, a north south ridge' in early 1840. In Darwin's account, being 'short of grass' Mollison 'dispatched two men [Richard Babbington and Henry Jackson] to look west for suitable grazing land … with material to construct huts and bough yards. They briefly

established two outstations. The first was on the current Jim Crow Creek, which later became the Aboriginal station site. The second was on the Loddon near the present site of Guildford. Shepherds created the first outstation on 1 May 1840, consisting two huts and rough bough yards. Darwin writes that 'Mollison named his new run Jumcra. Thought to be an Aboriginal name, Mollison's two shepherds Macleod and Macfadden corrupted the name to Jim Crow'.

This explanation of a corruption from an Aboriginal word by Mollison, prompted by a patronising and unfunny anecdote about a stuttered misstatement of the word by one of his employees seems very unlikely. It is made very improbable given that this explanation occurred three months after Robinson wrote that Hepburn calls the area 'Jem Crow' (as teased out later in this article), and seven months after Parker referred to the mountain as 'Jim Crow' on 22 Sept 1839.

Likening the name Jumcra and its etymology to a later corruption of the words 'Jim Crow' that one of his shepherds stuttered is perhaps something of a rationalizing and patronizing explanation of a term that Mollison (and his sister) would have known to be racist. Otherwise, why would Mollison have said the run is 'nicknamed' Jim Crow? Why would he have tried to 'Australianise' it into Jumcra? And why would he tell the story to his sister other than as a fairly lame and racist joke, to pass on the blame for his deliberately corrupted name to one of his stuttering shepherds?

Jem Crow and 'The Jackdaw of Rheims'

There is an alternative explanation as to how and why John Hepburn coined the term 'Jem Crow', in the first instance for present day Mount Franklin prior to the Mollison account. Whilst the explanation does not take away from the odious and racist historical association of the name 'Jim Crow' in our contemporary Australian landscape, it does help put Hepburn's new name for the mountain in an alternative light.

The last two lines (161-162) of '*The Jackdaw of Rheims*' poem written in England in 1837 about a jackdaw (crow) read:

It's the custom, at Rome, new names to bestow,
So they canonized him by the name of Jem Crow!

The poem forms part of the 'Ingoldsby Legends' (full title: *The Ingoldsby Legends, or Mirth and Marvels)*. The legends were first printed during 1837 as a regular series in the magazine *Bentleys Miscellany* and later in *New Monthly Magazine*. Whilst they proved immensely popular and were compiled into books published in 1840, 1842 and 1847 by Richard Bentley and since republished, it is possible that the magazine series that contained the poem that John Hepburn may have drawn inspiration from for 'Jem Crow' in February 1840 was the earlier, illustrated magazine series.

The poem was originally written by Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845) under a pseudonym, Thomas Ingoldsby. Barham, an English Church of England cleric, was the best known of the Ingoldsby collection. On the surface it's about a jackdaw (crow) that steals a cardinal's ring and is made a saint. On another level, it humorously mocks some of the pious aspects of the church. On a darker level, it is very likely that the British poem less than obliquely references the racist 'Jim Crow' song very popular in both the US and Great Britain in the same era of the late 1830s.

A reading of the whole poem (from an 1843 book version) accompanied by associated original illustrations by Janette Miller was published on You Tube in 2017

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ybCDatpBMA. The narrator clearly says 'Jim Crow' at the end, but original versions, since republished, are consistently spelt 'Jem Crow': for example see https://www.bartleby.com/360/9/102.html published in 1904.

These illustrations, such as the one of the cover page of this document, emphasise an increasingly dishevelled and persecuted jackdaw, with a humped black back, ruffled and partly plucked feathers, only restored to glory and canonised as 'Jem Crow' with the finding of the cardinal's ring in the jackdaw's (crow's) nest.

This illustration arguably helps account for Hepburn's reference (via Robinson) to *Jem* Crow and the 'numerous small hollows' about it. John Hepburn's view of the mountain from the higher parts of his 'Smeaton Hill' squatting run would have shown only the domed dark summit, pockmarked by an extended dry El Nino of the late 1830s, with straggly fire and drought affected eucalypts and wattle regrowth on unstable, steep slopes around the summit.

The not dissimilarly formed Mount Warrenheip near Ballarat looked similarly ragged in early 2019, with emergent dead eucalypts above the regrowth from previous fires and ravages of the millennial drought on its steep flanks, with the former volcanic grasslands (now pasture) below.

This poem about a jackdaw being canonised as Jem Crow and the Rice song about Jim Crow does not make the term 'Jem Crow' or 'Jim Crow' any less racist, then or now. It simply highlights how pervasive racism was, and how it was transmitted internationally in the 1830s, including to colonial Australia through then popular poems and songs.

Others have been down a similar path before

A search on line reveals that several other communities, including in the UK, have recently been down a similar line of argument about renaming of landmarks and physical features once tagged as 'Jim Crow': see https://thisfragiletent.com/tag/jackdaw-of-rheims/

A rock on the Dunoon shoreline (in coastal Scotland, west of Glasgow) was painted with the words 'Jim Crow' in approximately 1900. The local *Observer* paper excused the graffiti on the grounds that Richard Barham used the words 'Jim Crow' in his poem. The *Observer* argued that '… it is unlikely that Dunoon people knew about [US Jim Crow] laws when the rock was originally painted, possibly around 1900'. What follows in *italics* was posted in 2010 as part of the Dunoon debate about the 'murky history' associated with the naming of their rock. It is provided in full because some to the Scottish connections in the Dunoon case would also seem relevant, given John Hepburn's Scottish origins and family connections.

> *Here is the question- why did Barham use this name? The song 'Jump Jim Crow' was a huge international hit, with sheet music sold over all the world, carrying the caricature everywhere it went. The song was written [in 1828, done in blackface by a white minstrel performer] about 5-10 years before the 'Jackdaw of Rheims' was published. The Observer reporter appears to assume that before the internet, before radio and TV, communication of ideas like this between continents was unlikely - that there could be no real exchange of ideas between sleepy Dunoon and America. This is to totally misunderstand our history:*
> - *The communication revolution of the modern age: the printing press.*
> - *The connections between the [Scottish] Clyde basin, as a major trading port, and the Americas.*

- *The huge popularity of the music halls, and the spread of 'minstrel' songs.*
- *Our role in triangular [slave] trade routes.*
- *In 1817 Scots owned almost a third of all of the slaves in Jamaica.*
- *The influence of this trade on the wealth and development of Scotland.*

Looking back from a totally different culture and time, there is no blame that can be attached to whoever first crudely decorated this rock and wrote 'Jim Crow' on its side. It was probably a bit of holiday fun. Using terms and prejudices were so pervasive that they were hardly noticed.

The issue remains how we come to understand the symbolism contained within this image now– how we engage honestly with our past.

Conclusion

Both Richard Barham and John Hepburn, to use the Scottish double negative, would not have been unaware of the widespread and socially accepted racist connotations of 'Jim Crow' when they respectively wrote 'Jem Crow' into the 'Jackdaw of Rheims', and renamed *Lalgambook* as 'Jem Crow' or Jim Crow Hill. Hepburn was widely travelled as a sea captain globally, including to the US. Both Barham and Hepburn would have been very familiar with the 'Jump Jim Crow' song popular in the same era of the late 1830s.

It was a custom, as the second last line of 'The Jackdaw of Rheims' poem makes clear, for empires, their explorers, invaders and conquerors to bestow new names on geographical features. The mistake in Australia was not only not asking the traditional owners what names were already in place in the already settled, cultured and named landscape dubbed *Australia Felix* by Major Mitchell in 1836, but also arbitrarily declaring the convenient legal figment of *terra nullius*: empty land over the whole of continental Australia.

It is particularly unfortunate in the case of our 'Jim Crow Creek' that the name the invaders chose had *and retains* racist connotations, Understandably, the traditional owners the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Nation, are concerned about what they perceive as a particularly offensive name for a very beautiful part of their traditional lands.

Some locals who support a change of name in the Hepburn and Mount Alexander Shires and are frustrated by the slow speed and formal consultation processes necessarily involved in a possible name change have recently taken the matter into their own hands by altering the Jim Crow Creek roadside signage, including removing the word 'Jim'. It is important to note that if an official change is to be made it will have to follow due process, and it will be up to the Dja Dja Wurrung people to identify and recommend an alternative.

'Jem' is one of at least 20 diminutives or variants of 'James'. Whether it's 'Jem', 'Jim' or 'James', when put alongside 'Crow', particularly in an attempt 180 years ago at very dubious humour with then known racist and derogatory associations, both the poem and the song are and were racist and derogatory towards African Americans and all black peoples, including Indigenous Australians. The strong likelihood is that the name was actually chosen by John Hepburn (or less likely by Alexander Mollison) in the full knowledge if its racist (but then popular) connotations.

Jim Crow Creek, in my personal estimation and based on all of the evidence, is a totally inappropriate, racist and uneasy name to retain in a contemporary Australian landscape. If there is an original and appropriate local name going back one thousand generations that the community can embrace and support, the name restoration process and the community learning and reconciliation that goes with it will be a win-win.

This process, if it proceeds to a restoration of an original name, cannot and will not change historical records. It simply officially changes a name on all future maps along with the very small number of road signs with 'Jim Crow' on them (such as on the Guilford – Newstead Road near Strangways and at Yandoit) and on one Streamside Reserve near Franklinford. What the community will learn about our history and heritage in the process of restoring an ancient and original name will be a huge bonus.

To paraphrase the conclusion in the Dunoon 'Jim Crow' rock debate in Scotland, the issue in Australia remains how we come to understand the symbolism contained within our landscape and how we engage honestly with and reconcile our past. And Jim Crow Creek in central Victoria gives us an opportunity to do just that. There would appear to be no better time than National Reconciliation Week in mid 2019, with its 'Grounded in Truth' theme, to walk together with courage and start to right some of the past and enduring wrongs.

To again paraphrase extensively from the 2010 Dunoon post: Are we sure that Jim Crow Creek in Australia is just a little bit of harmless local colour? And even if it is just that, are we really comfortable with the associations that are being made, and the offence that this might carry not only to the descendants of slaves who had to fight on for generations against the oppression of the Jim Crow laws, but particularly to all Aboriginal Australians?

The many other names we use for our fondest local rivers, creeks, mountains and hills are cultural artefacts from an era of colonial appropriation of land, resources and peoples that began with Major Mitchell falsely declaring the land of *Australia Felix* open and empty in 1836. We can't undo the past but we can right some of the wrongs.

If we are to choose to retain odious or unfortunate names from an era of initial exploration and appropriation, then let us also put other signs and signposts in the landscape *other than* to explorers, local squatters (and other privileged white men) or to our involvement in brutal and sometimes fruitless overseas conflicts.

Dja Dja Wurrung names going back over one thousand generations, where they are known and appropriate to a place we cherish in our landscape would seem to be a very good first choice, and another small step of many towards local and national Indigenous reconciliation.