

Exploring Eneabba

It is surprising how easy it is to be misled when it comes to Australian placenames, particularly when the name is of Indigenous origin. The potential for confusion arising from differing cultural assumptions and practices in assigning names to locations, localities and physical features in the landscape has been well documented.¹ Furthermore, in many cases such placenames can only be understood in their cultural context, such as when they refer to a mythological account in which the named feature, locality or place forms a significant part of the story. But when there are no informants available who have any proficiency in the applicable language, providing an explanation for the name can become even more difficult. Often, by default, ill-founded local traditions then gain currency, becoming in time the accepted derivation. In such circumstances the best hope of arriving at the proper meaning of the placename depends on historical recordings of that language and some form of linguistic analysis. Here Amery's "principles"² provide an invaluable guide, as will become evident.

Eneabba (population 300), lies about 280 km north north west of Perth in Western Australia. It is a relatively young town, only being gazetted on 27 January 1961.³ The area around Eneabba is mostly flat scrubby sand plain, with the town servicing the local farming community and the mineral sands mining industry. The town was named after "a nearby spring," Eneabba Spring, which lies 13 km to the east. This name was first recorded by a surveyor, G. M. Nunn, in 1903.⁴ In endeavouring to explain the origin of the name, the current body responsible, Landgate, states that:

*"The meaning is said to be 'small water', from ena meaning water, and abba meaning small. The spring was known as 'Pocket Knife Spring' by the early settlers who told stories of the magical power of a pocket knife dropped in the spring."*⁵

This curious bit of history about the name probably derives from an anonymous typescript held in the Battye Library in Perth, "Native Meanings of Townships North of Gin Gin".⁶ This document, which seems to have been written in the 1960s or 1970s, lists a series of placenames and their etymologies, much of which is highly questionable. Typed alongside "Eneabba" is "ENa is water. Thabba is spring; Enathabba is 'Spring Water' (Nellie Parker)", but underneath this, written in by hand, is "Enda = Pocket Knife" "abba = small" "Pocket Knife Springs – Legend amongst early settlers."

The document lists a number of sources at the beginning. The Nellie Parker mentioned is listed there as "a member of the now extinct Carnamah tribe." Carnamah is a town 170 km southward, but there was never any Carnamah tribe as such. While Eneabba sits within an area in which the Amangu language was formerly spoken,⁷ Carnamah is considered by some to be in the Amangu area,⁸ or on the border of Amangu and Badimaya by others.⁹ However, it is not clear in the document what is Nellie Parker's contribution, apart from 'Spring Water', and what is that of the anonymous compiler. Consequently, the language information provided cannot be relied upon.¹⁰

In endeavouring to arrive at the meaning of Eneabba, the critical question is whether the appellation was being applied to the locality in which the spring was situated, was

it the name of the spring, or was it simply a common noun for a spring? The confusing and uncertain information supplied, upon which the current derivation appears to be based on, is certainly not much assistance in this regard. Here we have “*ena* meaning/= water”, “*abba* meaning/= small”, “*Thabba* is spring”, “*Enda* = Pocket Knife” and “Spring Water”. I would suggest this information in fact contains a litany of errors, as will become apparent.

As mentioned earlier, the Amangu language was formerly spoken in this area. While there were two speakers alive in 1966, alas no material seems to have been elicited in modern times. Consequently the primary source for the language is a number of word lists compiled between about 1851 and 1959.¹¹ In those lists the words ‘e-na’,¹² ‘ena’,¹³ ‘enah’,¹⁴ ‘enner’,¹⁵ and ‘eena’¹⁶ appear, meaning ‘foot’. A feature of Amangu, and its dialectical relative Nhanda, is ‘initial phoneme dropping’,¹⁷ In cases where there was shared vocabulary with adjacent languages, the initial consonant was often absent in corresponding Amangu and Nhanda terms. So, for example, in most languages from Ngaluma in the north west of WA to Minang on the south coast the words for ‘foot’ were cognates of ‘tjen/tjena/tjin/tjina’.¹⁸ Consequently ‘ena’ would appear to be an Amangu cognate referring to the foot, with the initial consonant missing. Confirmation of this is the observation that there are no recorded occurrences in Nhanda and Amangu of ‘ena’, or any cognate of that, as the word for ‘water’.

If one considers the word for ‘water’, there appear to have been two different cognates recorded in Amangu and Nhanda, ‘owwa/howa’ and the allophonic variants ‘apa/aba/appa/abba’. The former was only recorded in the northern part of Amangu, around Geraldton and Dongara, as ‘ow-wa’,¹⁹ ‘ow’wa’,²⁰ ‘howah’²¹ and ‘howa’²² (hence the placename Howatharra just to the north of Geraldton). Elsewhere in Amangu and Nhanda, the ‘apa/aba/appa/abba’ form has been recorded.²³ This is another example of initial phoneme dropping. For many languages to the north, as far as Ngaluma in the Pilbara at least, the equivalent terms was ‘baba/babba’, while to the south, in the Nyoongar languages, it was ‘gabi/kapi’. It would seem, on the basis of this evidence that ‘abba’ actually refers to water. This is confirmed when cognates for ‘small’, or ‘little’, in Nhanda and Amangu are taken into consideration, they are all of the form ‘puri’,²⁴ ruling out ‘abba’ as ‘small’.

The next etymology for Eneabba based on ‘Thabba’ as spring, in combination with ‘ena’ as ‘water’, is found wanting in the first instance because of the problem that ‘ena’ was not a word for ‘water’. Recordings of terms for ‘spring’ as a common noun are rare in Aboriginal languages in southern WA, although what appear to be names for specific springs do occur in the region.²⁵ While words for ‘spring’, such as ‘ngura’ and ‘ngirgo’, have been recorded in the past in Nyoongar languages,²⁶ the only example recorded in the Nhanda/Amangu region appears to be ‘-carah’.²⁷ However, if the word ‘thabba’ itself is considered, it should be noted that Daisy Bates recorded this as a Nhanda term for a stone ‘knife’.²⁸ Furthermore, Nyoongar recordings of the name for such knives have included cognates such as ‘dabba/dabber/dabbah/dtabba/tabba/taap’.²⁹ Consequently, one is led to conclude that ‘thabba’ does not in fact mean ‘spring’ but ‘knife’ instead.

What significance ‘Enda’, the last of the terms suggested as having some bearing on the etymology of Eneabba, has is unclear. Although followed by ‘abba = small’ it would appear that the intent was to ally it with ‘thabba’ as ‘spring’ to produce ‘Pocket

Knife Spring'. Apart from the issues of the phonological divergence of 'Enda-thabba' from Eneabba, and the conclusion that 'thabba' probably meant 'knife', 'Enda' is also problematic. Clearly it is a neologism, so is it feasible that could have entered the Amangu lexicon by 1903, when Eneabba Spring was actually named? As pocket knives were not common at the time the spring was named,³⁰ the likelihood of a neologism for 'pocket knife' coming into existence in Amangu and then being applied to the spring would appear remote.

Having called into question the basis for the various proposed etymologies for Eneabba, what then is its true meaning? Perhaps the answer may lie in the correct attribution of its linguistic components. With 'ena' being the word for foot and 'abba' the one for water, the literal translation then is 'foot-water'. From this I would conjecture the real meaning is 'ground spring', water found at the foot, at ground level. As such it would appear to be a common noun and not the specific name of that spring or the general locality. This may have been the meaning that informants were trying to convey when 'small water' and 'Spring Water' were suggested, just that the linguistic justification became flawed and confused. Some support for the 'ground spring' conjecture can be found in a description of Eneabba Spring, one of a number of springs which are formed by a siltstone outcrop sitting "just below the height of the watertable in the Leederville-Parmelia aquifer, and as such represent aquifer overflow."³¹ Consequently I would conclude that the most likely meaning of Eneabba is simply 'ground spring'.

¹ Hercus, L. (2002) Is it really a place name? In L. Hercus, F. Hodges and J. Simpson, (eds) *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Indigenous Origin in Australia*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, pp.66-70.

² Amery, R. (2002) Weeding out spurious etymologies: Toponyms on the Adelaide Plains. In *Ibid*, pp.177-8.

³ Western Australian Department of Lands and Surveys Nomenclature Index – Eneabba: Western Australian State Records Office.

See also <http://www.landgate.wa.gov.au/corporate.nsf/web/History+of+country+town+names+-+e>

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ <http://www.landgate.wa.gov.au/corporate.nsf/web/History+of+country+town+names+-+e>

⁶ Anon. (n.d.) Native meanings of townships north of Gin Gin: State Library of Western Australia: Ephemera - Printed Record 342.

⁷ Tindale N. B. (1974) *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, Maps: Australia SW Sheet; Thieberger, N. (1993) *Handbook of Western Australian Languages South of the Kimberley Region*. pp.70,74.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ e.g. Dunn, L. (1988) Badimaya, a Western Australian language. *Papers in Australian Linguistics* 17: 19-149. *Pacific Linguistics Series A-71*, p.22.

¹⁰ Daisy Bates in fact recorded 'gabbee' as the word for water from an informant from Carnamah around 1905, which is consistent with other recordings from this area. See 'Native vocabulary compiled by Baandee or Manninggoo (male) of Carnamah'. (n.d.) Section XII Pt.2B.20/folio 42. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.

¹¹ Thieberger pp.74-5.

¹² Foley, R. J. (1865) Vocabulary of the Champion Bay tribe. *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 3:297.

¹³ R. T. Goldsworthy (1886) Champion Bay. In E. M. Curr (comp.) *The Australian Race*, vol. 1, p.315.

¹⁴ 'Anon. (n.d.) 'Native vocabulary, Champion Bay, Victoria District (from Leaflet)'. In Section XII Pt.2B.25a/folio 43. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.

¹⁵ R. T. Goldsworthy, R. T. (1886) Northampton – Eaw tribe. In E. M. Curr, p.315.

-
- ¹⁶ 'Native vocabulary compiled by Marratharra for Winjarroo of Dhoongara,' (n.d.) Section XII Pt.2F.1/folio 54. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- ¹⁷ Blevins, J. (1999) Nhanta and its position within Pama-Nyungan. *Oceanic Linguistics* 38(2):299-302.
- ¹⁸ Douglas, W. H. (1976) *The Aboriginal Languages of the South-West of Australia*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. *Australian Aboriginal Studies Research and Regional Studies No. 9.*, pp.6,74; Bindon, P. and Chadwick, R. (comps. and eds) (1992) *A Nyoongar Wordlist from the South-West of Western Australia*. Perth: Anthropology Department, Western Australian Museum. p.268.
- ¹⁹ Foley p.297.
- ²⁰ 'Native vocabulary compiled by Marratharra'
- ²¹ 'Native vocabulary – Leaflet'
- ²² Goldsworthy – Champion Bay p.317
- ²³ e.g. Oldfield, A. (1865) The Aborigines of Australia. *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 3:295; Goldsworthy – Northampton p.315; O'Grady, G. N. (1959) "Significance of the circumcision boundary in Western Australia," BA thesis, University of Sydney p.51; Douglas, W. H. (1976) *The Aboriginal Languages of the South-West of Australia*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. *Australian Aboriginal Studies Research and Regional Studies No. 9.* p.7; Blevins, J. (2001) *Nhanda: An Aboriginal Language of Western Australia*, University of Hawai'i Press Honolulu. *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No.30*, p.165.
- ²⁴ O'Grady p.45; See for example Oldfield 3:296 ('boorie' - small); Goldsworthy – Northampton p.315 ('pureraber' – little).
- ²⁵ e.g. 'Ebanawa', 'Yandenooka' and 'Muralyong' in Colonial Secretary of Western Australia (1904) Western Australian Aboriginal place names (continued). *Science of Man* 7(1):9
- ²⁶ Bindon and Chadwick p.391
- ²⁷ Bain, M. A. (1975) *Ancient Landmarks: A Social and Economic History of the Victoria District of Western Australia 1839 – 1984*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press. p.178n8.
- ²⁸ Bates, D. M. (n.d.) Section IX Pt.3 'Weapons etc.', p.49/folio 30. Daisy M. Bates Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 365.
- ²⁹ Bindon and Chadwick p.305.
- ³⁰ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pocket_knife and http://www.ehow.com/facts_4909777_history-pocket-knives.html
- ³¹ Rutherford, J. L., Roy, V. J. and Johnston, S. L. (2005) *The Hydrogeology of Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems in the Northern Perth Basin*. East Perth: Government of Western Australian, Department of Environment. *Hydrogeological Record Series H11*. p.19.