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Bugged if I know where I am: the stories behind Australia's weird and wonderful place names

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Why is it that despite how much and how often we use toponyms (place names) linguists, geographers, cartographers, and historians know so little about how they actually work?

Why is it that place names are less prone to change than other aspects of language like accents and pronunciations? And how is it that regardless of how well furnished a map or smartphone may be with place names and directions, we still bloody well get lost? And why are so many Australian places named after knobs?

Eamon Evans's 280-page *Mount Buggery to Nowhere Else: the stories behind Australia's weird and wonderful place names* lists hundreds of place names — colonial, Aboriginal, German, and other — that adorn our country. It is an entertaining, non-academic read with a playful manner, which charts place names from the serious — the many names for Australia, for example — to the jocular, like Australia's many rude and dirty topographic monikers.

Many of Evans's humorous stories go a way to responding to some of the scientific inadequacies and toponymic foibles so common in place naming studies. And after I've spent almost a decade inundated with often sterile and uninspirational place name theory and how it may fit within more general research in onomastics, the study of proper names, Evans's tongue-in-cheek take is more than welcome.

The book begins with a reasonable and justified dis of Lucky Starr and his 1962 claim "I've been everywhere." Evans doubts this claim—fair enough, Lucky lists at least 94 places — and estimates this large country of ours has around four million place names. Visiting all of these sites would take yonks, around half a lifetime tells Evans, and would involve using lots of petrol, shoes, and time travelling

Author



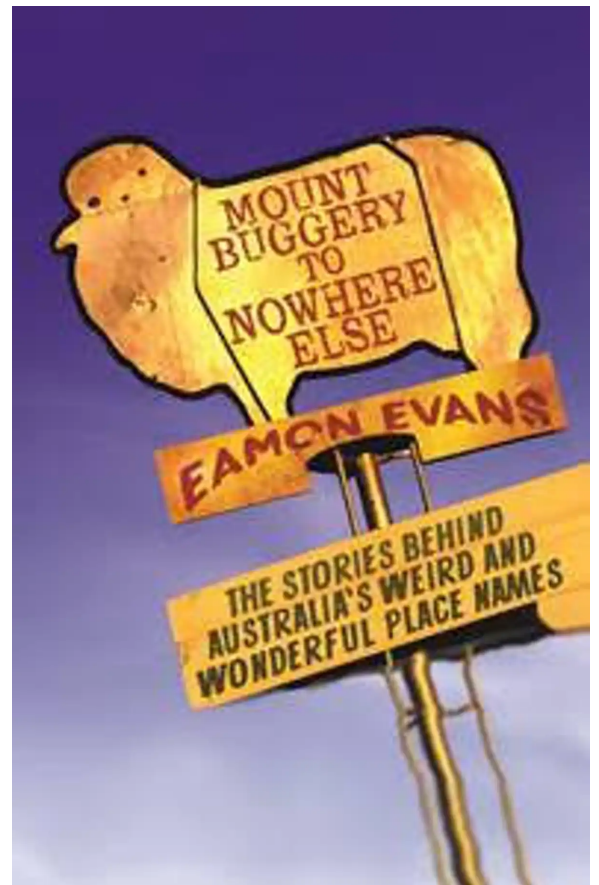
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beyond the Black Stump and back o' Bourke. He claims the observations and offbeat remarks in this companion save us from doing all this legwork and allows us to sit back and enjoy the often-bumpy yet comical toponymic ride.

I grew up in Adelaide, surrounded by road and place names honouring rich and powerful, dead white men (plus a minuscule number of women). I mean, how many William Streets, Edward Streets, Victoria Everythings, and Queen Elizabeth Otherthings does Australia need?

Naming is power, which Evans obviously understands. Furthermore, he takes the piss. And he bloody well should. Our eponymous (of a person) place name landscape is largely boring as bat turd and as stodgy and starchy as badly cooked porridge.



Eamon Evans, *Mount Buggery to Nowhere Else* (2016).
Hachette Australia



Nothing to see here...Mount Buggery in Victoria. Wikimedia commons

In telling us about the histories and etymologies (origins) of places, the colonial makeup of our pre-European toponymically terra-annuled joint is made real. Take Lake Alexandrina in South Australia:

named after Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandrina of Kent, the then heir to the British throne. A nice gesture, but perhaps a wasted one, as the princess much preferred her middle name. We now call her Queen Victoria.

We get quirky introductions to each of the nine chapters – one for Australia and one each for every state and territory – plus more toponymic toilet humour than one could poke a dirty toilet brush at in an outback dunny. The knob gets quite a mention, which we are told is a prominent rounded hill, mountain, or elevation on a ridge, with Chinamans Knob, Governors Knob, Iron Knob, Nimbin's Blue Knob, Spanker Knob, and Yorkeys Knob. I think you get the picture.

We're told about Mount Little Dick in Victoria, which Evans hopes is named after a small man named Richard who used to live there and nothing else, Lake Fanny near Mossy Nipple Bend in Tasmania, and a few perky hills also in Tasmania called The Nipples.

This feminal place name reminds me of a topographical name on Kangaroo Island I documented back in 2009. The Tits is a place with undulating landscape similar to a woman's corporeal scenery on the left side of Hog Bay Road near Pelican Lagoon. Between the Tits is a fishing ground off Kangaroo Head, which uses the space between The Tits in lining up the ground.

Apart from the colonial propensity for double entendres, some of these places are simply the victim of time: Cockburn (pronounced "ko-burn") was named after the prominent sailor Sir George Cockburn. Intercourse Island, 1,500 kilometres north of Perth, was the site of a productive conversation between Captain Philip Parker King and some local Indigenous people.

The listing of the town Verdun in South Australia gives excellent information about the cleansing-cum-sanitisation of German place names in South Australia during the Great War. Friedrichstadt became Tangari, Neudorf became Mamburdi, and Hahndorf became Ambleside to become Hahndorf again in 1935. "About the only German place name that wasn't changed," Evans tells us, "was Adelaide – a city named after a German princess".

Let's not forget those place names which are mistakes. For example, Bundle Bundle was bungled to become Bungle Bungle; Mount Kokeby, named after Baron Rokeby, was misspelled as "Kokeby" after a spelling error in one of the town's first train timetables. Place names are filled with specimens of our laziness and folly.

One can always quibble about what was not given. Regarding the contemporary issue of dual naming, something which could be taken from both a humorous and serious perspective, it was a shame not to have seen a little more beyond the Uluru-Ayers Rock example. For example, Nobbys Head in Newcastle is officially known as Whibayganba. What was formerly known as Grampians National Park in Victoria is now officially called Grampians / Gariwerd. The area contains the dual name Halls Gap / Budja Budja.

Dual place naming is a weighty and contentious affair in modern Australian politics and the social cartography of this once unnamed land is dependent on best representing all levels of place naming: Indigenous, British, German, and others. Perhaps this is something for the second edition of Evans's book, if he's not too buggered.

The story of Adaminaby, a mining town in New South Wales Evans says was supposedly named in honour of the line, “Ada’s mine it be,” makes one wonder about the credibility of some bush toponymic lore. But Evans happily acknowledges the hazier areas of his research, and ultimately, who cares?

Place names are fun and their study should be the same. What Evans offers is an amusing take on a potentially very dry topic. It’s not a weighty book and is minus a conclusion to pull it all together, but it would make a grouse Chrissie present.

If wit and quips can be used to good effect to get people thinking about important matters like place naming from a humorous and lively perspective, then Evans’s account is a noble achievement.

Mount Buggery to Nowhere Else, by Eamon Evans, is published by Hachette Australia and will go on sale on October 25.



Australia Review Book