

# The hard reality of “truth-telling”

## A report to the Guringai people on the ancestral language of the Central Coast

*Prepared for Guringai Tribal Link Aboriginal Corporation by*

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# The hard reality of “truth-telling”

## A report to the Guringai people on the ancestral language of the Central Coast

Jim Wafer

### 1. Introduction

The question of which Australian language was spoken on the Central Coast (NSW) at the time of invasion and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been addressed in the scholarly literature on several occasions in the past.<sup>1</sup> But it has become a pressing public issue in 2021, when the broader community is being led to believe that **the ancestral language of the Central Coast region (roughly from north of Swansea to the Hawkesbury River) is Darkinjung.**

It would be no exaggeration to say that there has been a **concerted propaganda campaign** to this effect. The evidence consists not just in the **“Darkinjung country” signs erected at six of the major entrance roads to the Central Coast, but also in the use of Darkinjung language in documents such as the “Gosford CBD Project”,<sup>2</sup> in the naming of cafés on the Ourimbah campus of the University,<sup>3</sup> and in public “welcomes to Country” on formal occasions.** I am not aware of any current moves to teach Darkinjung language in schools on the Central Coast, but the impetus of the current “Darkinjung push” is clearly heading in that direction.

### 2. The Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council (DLALC) and its name

The Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council was one of 120 Local Aboriginal Land Councils set up in 1983 under the provisions of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (ALR Act).<sup>4</sup> But, as Dennis Foley has put the matter,

Our traditional custodians were ill-prepared for what followed. Aboriginal Land Councils were established very quickly and began a land grab. This was often without any involvement or consent from local Aboriginal people who were direct descendants of the traditional people of the lands in question.<sup>5</sup>

As Foley points out, this haste and lack of consultation has had damaging consequences throughout NSW. In the case of the Central Coast, the LALC given responsibility for the region between **“Catherine Hill Bay to the North, Hawkesbury River to the South, Pacific Ocean to the East and Watagan Mountains to the West”<sup>6</sup> adopted the name “Darkinjung”.**

How or why this name was chosen has never been made clear, but it seems likely it was simply a matter of taking Norman Tindale’s 1974 map of “Tribal Boundaries in Aboriginal Australia” and choosing the name of the “tribe” that Tindale showed as occupying the region east of the Macdonald River. On Tindale’s map, the supposed territory of this “tribe” skirts around the country

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Capell 1970; Wafer and Lissarrague 2008:160-164; Wafer and Lissarrague 2010.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/csrrf/projects/gosford-cbd-project>; see also <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Plans-for-your-area/Regional-Plans/Central-Coast>

<sup>3</sup> <https://uonstaff.sharepoint.com/sites/IntheLoop/SitePages/New-names-and-a-new-experience-at-Ourimbah-caf%C3%A9s.aspx>

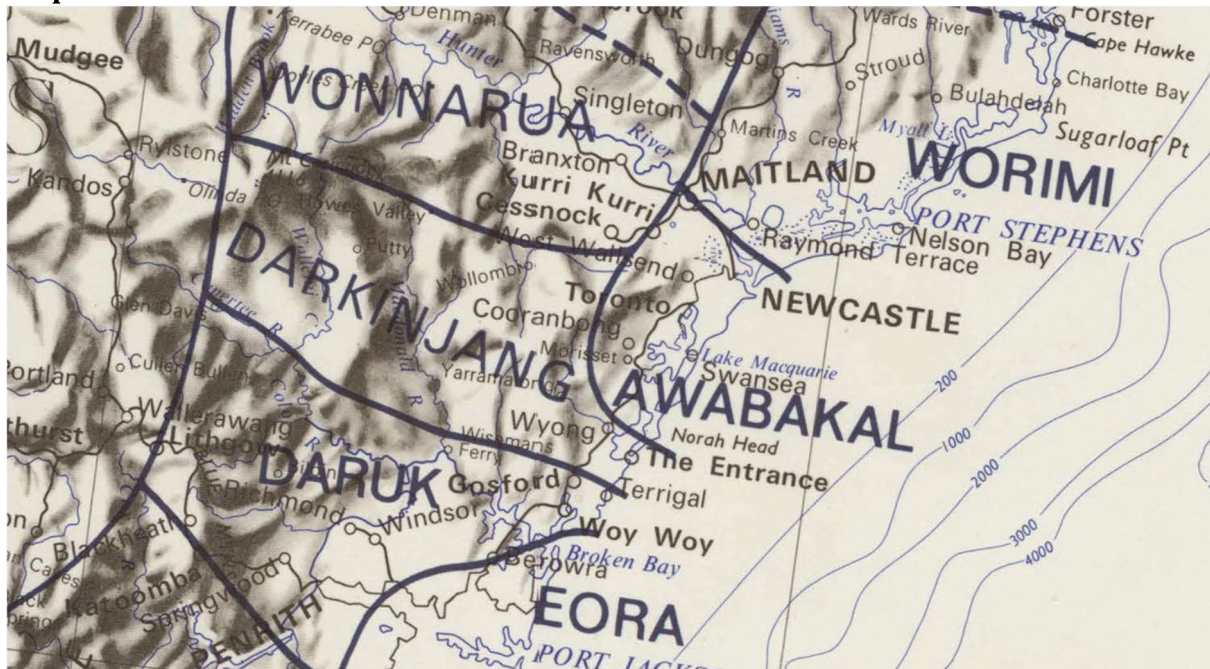
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Aboriginal-land-use-planning>

<sup>5</sup> Foley 2007:168. <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/caepr/social-effects-native-title>. See also McLean 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.darkinjung.com.au/>

of the “Awabakal” on the lower Hunter and at Lake Macquarie, but has a corridor to the coast that passes through Wyong and The Entrance (see Map 1).

### Map 1



**Detail from eastern NSW section of Tindale map (1974b)**

### 3. The Tindale map compared with Tindale’s text

Oddly enough, the map is not an accurate reflection of what Tindale wrote about the location of the Darkinjang tribe in the book that his map accompanies (1974:193):

#### **Darkinjang**

#### **'Darkinjan**

Loc.: South of watershed of Hunter River, from well south of Jerry’s Plains extending east toward Wollombi and Cessnock; at Putty, and ranging over portions of the Macdonald and Colo rivers. Near Wisemans Ferry on the Hawkesbury River (Mathews); western boundary (based only on Wiradjuri tribe data) was on the divide east of Rylstone. Enright (1901) included the territory of the Daruk in their range.

Coord.: 150°50'E x 33°5'S.

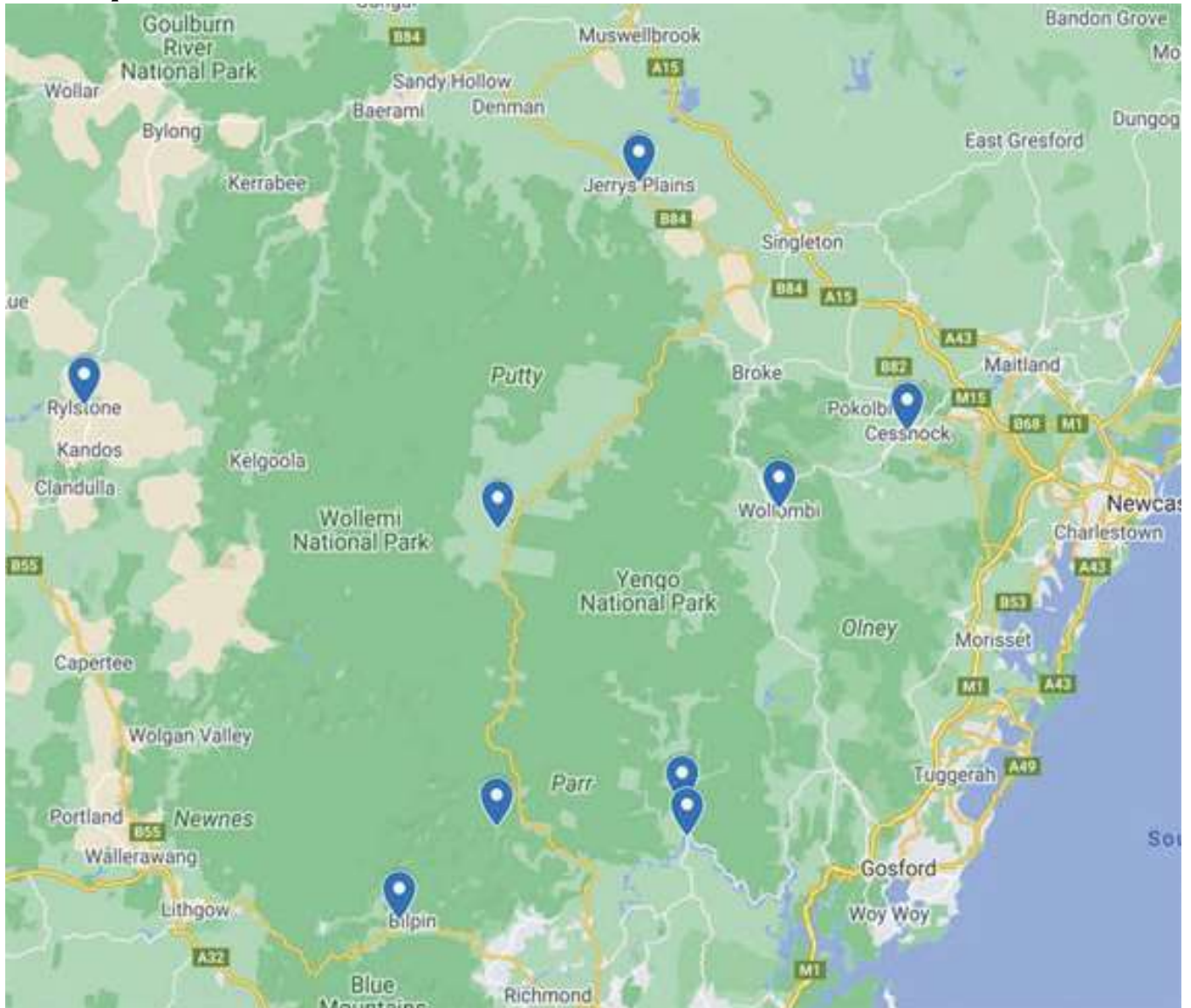
Area: 1,800 sq. m. (4,700 sq. km.).

Alt.: Darginjang, Darkinung, Darknung.

Ref.: Mathews, 1897 (Gr. 6430, 6567), 1898 (Gr. 6468), 1900 (Gr. 6524), 1903 (Gr. 6489), 1904 (Gr. 6451); Enright, 1901, 1937; Tindale, 1940; Elkin, 1946.

The places listed by Tindale are shown on the map on the following page. A comparison of Map 1 and Map 2 indicates that there is no justification whatsoever for the corridor to the coast that Tindale has drawn on the 1974 map. The people he calls the Darkinjang tribe are clearly an inland group with a heartland around Putty, inhabiting also the ranges surrounding the Macdonald River. Note that they are not “at” Jerrys Plains or Wollombi or Cessnock or Wisemans Ferry, but “well south” of Jerrys Plains, “extending east toward” Wollombi and Cessnock and “near” Wisemans Ferry. It seems unlikely that they ranged as far as Rylestone, but that is not material to the present discussion.

## Map 2



### **Places relevant to location of Darkinjang, based on Tindale (1974a)**

All the placenames listed by Tindale are indicated on this map by blue pins. The names of Jerrys Plains, Rylestone, Wollombi and Cessnock are clearly indicated. The unnamed pins are Putty (left of centre), Colo River (due south of Putty), Macdonald River (east of Colo River), Wisemans Ferry (at junction of Macdonald and Hawkesbury Rivers; pin partly obscures pin for Macdonald River). The reason Bilpin appears on this map is that it is the location that corresponds to Tindale's co-ordinates (150°50'E x 33°5'S).<sup>7</sup>

#### *4. Tindale's sources*

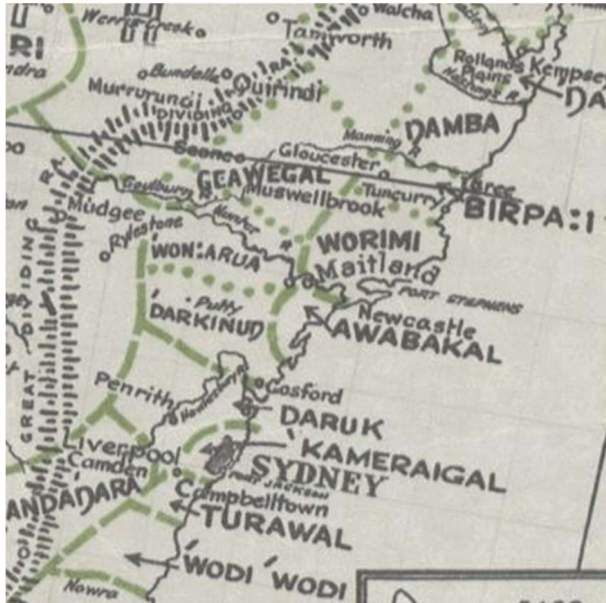
Tindale lists ten works on which he has based his account of the location of Darkinjang, and these are referenced in full in the bibliography at the end of the present report. But there is only one of these items that has any substantive relevance to the location of Darkinjang, namely the one he lists as "Mathews, 1897 (Gr.6430)",<sup>8</sup> that is R.H. Mathews' 1897 article on "The Burbung of the Darkinung tribes" (*Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 10, new series: 1–12).

<sup>7</sup> For Darkinyung associations with Bilpin, see Ford 2010:81-82 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Tindale's references to the works of Mathews include a "Gr." number. This is the number under

This is the one and only source he lists for the location of “Darkinung” in the 1940 work<sup>9</sup> on which his more recent book is based. In this earlier survey of “Australian Aboriginal tribes”, he provided (as he did again in 1974) both a map and a text version of the location of Darkinung:

### Map 3



**Detail from eastern NSW section of Tindale map (1940b)**

The text version reads as follows

'DarkinunDarkinung  
 Loc.: South of Hunter River, from Jerry Plains towards Maitland, south to Wollombi Brook, at Putty, and including Macdonald, Colo, and Hawkesbury Rivers (Mathews); western boundary on divide east of Rylstone (based on Wiradjuri tribe data).  
 Ref.: Mathews 1897, (T).  
 (Tindale 1940:190)

Note that Putty is, again, roughly in the centre of Darkinun country, but the coastal corridor is slightly further south than on the 1974 map, with the result that the southern “boundary” runs through Gosford. Note also that, in this prose account, as in the later one, **there is no justification for the coastal corridor. So we are left to wonder why Tindale conceived the idea that it existed.** There is an answer to this question, but it needs some background discussion of the material Tindale has drawn from R.H. Mathews.

### 5. R.H. Mathews and Darkinung

In the Mathews article cited by Tindale in both 1940 and 1974, the opening paragraphs read as follows:

The initiation ceremonies described in this article represent those practised by the aboriginal tribes spread over the coastal district of New South Wales, from Newcastle southerly to

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which the item appears in John Greenway’s *Bibliography of the Australian Aborigines and the native peoples of Torres Strait to 1959* (1963).

<sup>9</sup>Tindale 1940:1.

about Sydney, comprising approximately the Counties of Northumberland, Hunter, Cook, and the greater part of the County of Cumberland. One of the principal dialects was the Darkinung, which was spoken by the tribes occupying the country on the southern side of the Hunter River, from Jerry's Plains downwards towards Maitland, extending southerly to Wollombi Brook, Putty Creek, and including the Macdonald, Colo, and Hawkesbury Rivers. Amongst other dialects employed within the boundaries indicated may be mentioned the Wannungine, and Darrook; but it is probable that in former times there were others of less importance, which have entirely disappeared at the present day.

A small remnant of the Darkinung Tribe, numbering about sixty persons—men, women, and children—are at present located on a Government Reserve on the left bank of the Hawkesbury River, about twelve miles below Windsor, and consist chiefly of half-castes. There are now only two initiated men surviving in this tribe—Joe Gooburra, a pure black, and Charley Clark, a half-caste—both being old and infirm, and likely to pass away at any time. It was from these two old men, with whom I have been acquainted for some years, that I obtained the particulars given in the following pages.<sup>10</sup>

This is the first use of the term “Darkinung” in any published source, and it would be fair to assume that Mathews’ use of the name to indicate both a language and a “tribe”, and his account of the location, was based on his conversations with these two old men.

This is confirmed in Martin Thomas’s biography of Mathews. He writes that “Charley Clark, mentioned earlier as a source of information on Darkinung initiation, was first introduced to Mathews as a maker of hand stencils near the Hawkesbury River. Clark lived at Sackville Reach, an Aboriginal reserve fronting the river . . .”<sup>11</sup> No date is provided, but Mathews’ meeting with Gooburra and Clark must have taken place after Mathews moved to Parramatta (1888-89), which is about 50km south of Sackville Reach, and probably after he undertook his first ethnographic field trip (1892).<sup>12</sup>

Mathews wrote about Darkinung language and culture in a number of later articles,<sup>13</sup> but there were only two further references to the location of Darkinung people. The first of these was in the text accompanying a map titled simply “Map of New South Wales”, which Mathews published in 1898. The map was included in his article on “Initiation ceremonies of Australian tribes”.<sup>14</sup> (The eastern section of this map is reproduced on the next page as Map 4.)

There are nine numbered “language groups” (or “tribal groups”) on the map, and Mathews’ key to the numbering system occurs on pp. 67-69 of the article. There is not space here to reproduce the whole key, but the group that concerns us in the present report is the one Tindale has labelled as “4”. His account follows the map below:

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<sup>10</sup> Mathews’ 1897a:1. Further details about Mathews relations with the people at Sackville can be found in Ford (2010:211:212).

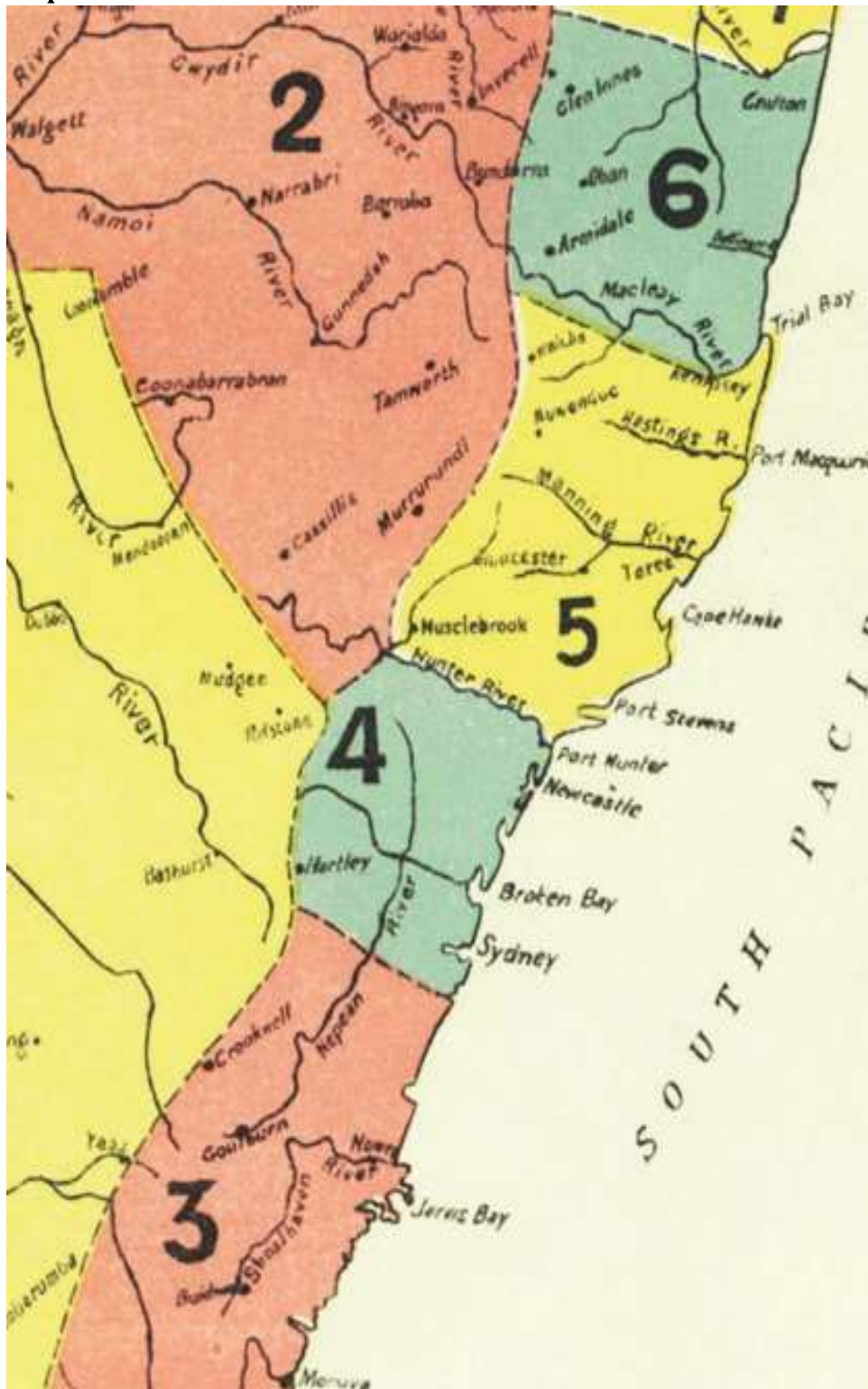
<sup>11</sup> Thomas 2012:250. The reference given by Thomas is “Red notebook, R.H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/11, 1.”

<sup>12</sup> Both dates as given by Thomas 2012:222, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Most of the linguistic material is to be found in the 1897a article already cited and in Mathews 1903:271-275).

<sup>14</sup> Mathews 1898. The map is placed between pp. 68 and 69 of this article and listed as “Plate V.”

Map 4.



Detail from eastern section of Mathews map (1898)

No. 4 represents the country occupied by the tribes speaking the Darkinung, Wannerawa, Warrimee, Wannungine, Dharrook and some other dialects. Their country commences at the Hunter river and extends southerly till it meets and merges into that of the people of No. 3. Their ceremony of initiation is known as the Narramang, which is described in a paper

published in Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria, Vol. x, N. S., pp. 1-12. Their totemic system is dealt with in Journ. Roy. Soc. N. S. Wales, Vol. xxxi, pp. 170-171.<sup>15</sup>

In 1900 Mathews produced another map, as part of his 1900 article on “The origin, organization and ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines” (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 39: 556–78). But this time he attempted to include all the Aboriginal “nations” of Australia. The relevant excerpt is reproduced here as Map 5.<sup>16</sup>

### Map 5



### Detail from eastern section of Mathews map (1900)

In this map there are 27 Aboriginal “nations”. The ones of interest to us here are numbered 9 and 10. Nation 9 is labelled “Darkinung” and Nation 10 is labelled “Thangatty” (p. 576)

There are serious problems with both maps. The earlier map (1898) omits two major dialects that were spoken in the region circumscribed by the boundary lines Mathews has attributed to group 4. One of these is Awabakal, which is included on both of Tindale’s maps (see Maps 1 and 3, above). The other is Guringai, which is also omitted by Tindale.

In the later map (1900), Mathews has, again, omitted Awabakal and Guringai, but this time also Dharrook, and conflated all three under the label “Darkinung”. In addition, he has combined groups 5 and 6 of the earlier map and amalgamated them under the name “Thangatty”.

<sup>15</sup> Mathews 1898:68.

<sup>16</sup> The map is placed between pp. 574 and 575.



## 6. Mathews' shortcomings

In 2002, the historian Kevin Blackburn published a critique of the use, by late 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists, of "nation" as the appropriate term for groupings of Indigenous Australians, and in it he reserved special censure for R.H. Mathews.

The method that Mathews used to map Aboriginal nations was indeed flawed. In several instances, he just took the name of one tribe and referred to a whole block of tribes by that name. Mathews admitted that he had done this in his maps of a number of Aboriginal nations.<sup>17</sup>

We have seen already an example of this practice: this is exactly what Mathews did in treating all the Aboriginal people inhabiting the region between Sydney and the Hunter River as members of the same "nation" and calling that nation "Darkinung". The great irony of this situation is that Blackburn republished Mathews' 1900 map (in a simplified version<sup>18</sup>) and this map is (or so I gather) currently being used to justify the Darkinjung takeover of the Central Coast.

Map 6



Detail (eastern section) from Blackburn's redrawn version of Mathews 1900 map

It scarcely needs to be said that this is an appalling abuse of Blackburn's scholarly work (and intentions).

## 7. Mathews and Fraser

Mathews can be forgiven for overlooking the dialect that the Horton map (1996) calls "Kuring-gai", since the relevant research was not published until 1970 (by the linguist Arthur Capell). But it is hard to imagine he could have been unaware of Awabakal. He lived in Singleton for "almost a decade" (1880-1888),<sup>19</sup> and while he was there, the Maitland schoolteacher Dr John Fraser was working on his (1892) republication of the linguistic work of Lancelot Threlkeld. Threlkeld had written

<sup>17</sup> Blackburn 2002:149; see also p. 147: "Mathews also admitted that he included in some Aboriginal nations several tribes that did not all speak the same language."

<sup>18</sup> Blackburn 2003:140.

<sup>19</sup> See Thomas 2011:205; cf. 222.

voluminously on the language of the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie, which Fraser decided to call “Awabakal”.<sup>20</sup>

Map 7



Detail from eastern NSW section of Fraser map (1892)

Maitland, only 50 km from Singleton, was in that period the major town of the Hunter Valley. It is scarcely credible that Mathews’ social life in the eight years he spent in Singleton would not have involved some form of acquaintance with Fraser.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as a self-styled “ethnologist”, Mathews had a responsibility to be aware of the literature relevant to his scholarly accounts. He

<sup>20</sup> For the reasons behind (and implications of) Fraser’s use of this name, see Wafer 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser is also mentioned in correspondence from John Mathew to R.H. Mathews of 1898 (Thomas 2011:339, 425).

published his map of the “language groups” of NSW in 1898, that is, six years after Fraser’s book *An Australian language* had appeared in print. So it is not unreasonable to conjecture that Mathews’ omission of Awabakal was deliberate rather than an oversight.

Given Mathews’ history of rivalry with other ethnologists of his day (as detailed in Thomas’s biography), it seems at least plausible that Mathews regarded Fraser as a competitor.<sup>22</sup> Fraser had published his own map of NSW “tribal” groups, as part of his 1892 book. And, like Mathews, he had attempted to corral different “dialects” into groupings that would have some kind of substantive reality. The relevant section of this map is reproduced above, as map 7.

Fraser predated Mathews in his use of a numerical key for his map. But Fraser distinguishes fourteen “native tribes”, as distinct from Mathews’ nine (in his first map, of 1898), and in many cases uses different names for them (or, at least, different spellings of the names). **The Central Coast region is included in the area Fraser designates as “VIII”, and in the key provided at the bottom right of the full map, there appears the entry “8 Kurig-gai”.** Note that Fraser placed a dot above the first occurrence of the letter *g*, to indicate that it was to be pronounced as *ng* (which phoneticists write as *ŋ*).

There are a number of other significant differences between the two maps. **On Fraser’s map, group VIII extends south as far as Bulli and north as far as Port Macquarie. On Mathews’ map, group 4 also stretches down to where Bulli would be; but to the north, it stops at the Hunter River.** North of the river, the group is numbered “5” and keyed as including “Wattung, Gooreenggai, Minyowa, Molo, Kutthack, Bahree, Karrapath, Birrapee, etc.”<sup>23</sup>

Mathews and Fraser were both what 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics would come to regard as “amateur linguists”.<sup>24</sup> They made no clear distinction between “dialect” and “language” and conflated both terms with “tribe” (whatever that means). Nonetheless, their basic intuitions were correct: in modern linguistics it is accepted that “dialects” with relevant common features can be grouped into “languages”, and that “languages” too can be subjected to a higher order grouping.

#### 8. *Language classification in contemporary linguistics*

But the principles that need to be followed for these different levels of grouping to have any validity were not applied to Australian languages until 1919, when the Austrian linguist Wilhelm Schmidt published his *Die Gliederung der australischen Sprachen* (“The structure of the Australian languages”). As R.M.W. Dixon points out, this work, although “based on largely unreliable materials”, was nonetheless “the most careful study of existing materials” in its day.<sup>25</sup>

Since that time, there have been three further major attempts to classify Australian languages, by Arthur Capell, Kenneth Hale<sup>26</sup> and R.M.W. Dixon.<sup>27</sup> The discrepancies between their accounts involve technical matters that need not concern us here. Dixon provides the most recent attempt to update the map of the languages of Australia according to principles that are generally accepted by contemporary linguists (see map 9, below).

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<sup>22</sup> See also Kass 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Mathews 1898:68.

<sup>24</sup> See Dixon 1980:15.

<sup>25</sup> Dixon 1980:15, 21.

<sup>26</sup> For brief accounts of the relevant work by Capell and Hale, see Dixon 1980:21; 2002:45ff.

<sup>27</sup> Dixon 2002.

Dixon's key to this map is more complex than either Fraser's or Mathews', because he tries to distinguish between different levels of classification. His upper case letters indicate the highest level of grouping (N is keyed as the "Central New South Wales Group" and O as the "Sydney Subgroup"); lower case letters indicate a lower level of grouping, which Dixon calls a "subgroup" (with lower case s). The subgroup indicated by the lower case *a* on this section of the map is the "Awabagal/Gadjang subgroup", and *b* is the "Djan-gadi/Nganjaywana subgroup". The numbers associated with the lower case letters indicate languages: thus Na1 is "Awabagal" and Na2 is "Gadjang (Kattang)". Dixon also lists some of the associated further dialects, including (in the case of Na1) "Wonarua".<sup>28</sup>

**Map 8**



### **Detail from eastern NSW section of Dixon language map (2002: xxviii)**

The scale of the map is too small for the locations of the languages to be clearly discerned, but the projecting headland immediately below the letter *a* can only be the one on which Mount Tomaree stands, on the southern bank of the entrance to Port Stephens. Thus Dixon's placement of the letters 1 and 2 is essentially in accord with both contemporary linguistic analysis and the consensus of opinion among descendants of the speakers of the relevant languages – **although descendants of Guringai would prefer their dialect name to be recognised, along with Awabakal and Wonnarua, as part of the language that Dixon lists as Na1.**

Where does this leave Darkinjung? Dixon classifies it as O2 - that is, as one of the two languages of the "Sydney Subgroup" (the other one being "01 Dharuk"). This Subgroup's corridor to the coast appears to be bounded on the north by the Hawkesbury River, until it reaches the confluence with the Macdonald River (at Wisemans Ferry), at which point the "boundary" swings north to include the country attributed to Darkinjung in Tindale's prose accounts.

One of the weaknesses of such monumental attempts at linguistic classification is that the linguist's specialist knowledge is usually focused on the languages of a particular region (in Dixon's case, those of the Cairns and Herbert River regions, in Queensland), and, while their knowledge of the material

<sup>28</sup> Dixon 2002:xxxiv-xxxv.

from other regions can be extensive (as Dixon's clearly was), it is liable to have gaps, sometimes involving matters of considerable consequence to the relevant Aboriginal people.

In Mathews' case, his significant failure was to overlook the existence of the language that Fraser called "Awabakal". In Dixon's case, the gap that most concerns us here is his failure to make any mention of the dialect currently called "Guringai", or any reference to the article by Arthur Capell (1970) that establishes this dialect as a close relation of "Awabakal". This was in spite of the fact that Dixon's publication postdated Capell's by thirty-two years.

#### 9. Capell, "Kuringgai" and "Guringai"

In the late 1960s, Capell discovered manuscripts by Threlkeld (c. 1824) and J. F. Mann (1842) in the Mitchell Library "which were found to agree" (Capell 1970:23), and which he found "convenient to call Kuringgai".<sup>29</sup> Capell gave no other justification for calling this dialect "Kuringgai" than the fact of its convenience. But it can scarcely be doubted that he borrowed the term from Fraser, who had used exactly the same name, with same spelling, in his 1892 compilation of the works of Threlkeld (and others).<sup>30</sup> Fraser had invented the term to refer to "'one great tribe" that purportedly extended from just north of Port Macquarie as far south as Bulli. Capell's territorial claims were a little more modest. "A language which it is convenient to call Kuringgai (Guriringai) was spoken on the north side of Port Jackson, and extended at least to Tuggerah Lakes, merging then into Awaba."

It is worth noting that Capell's map (reproduced below) uses spellings of the language names that are slightly different from those he used in the text of his article. The differences of most interest are "Guringai" ("Kuringgai" and "Guringai" in the text) and "Garigal" ("Carigal" in the text).<sup>31</sup> It needs to be emphasised that these differences are merely differences of spelling conventions. They make no difference at all to the pronunciation of the words they are intended to represent.

Capell also included in his study a vocabulary collected by James Larmer that was published in 1898. In recent years, the manuscripts on which the Larmer article was based have been made available online by the State Library of NSW,<sup>32</sup> and they can now be dated to roughly the same period as the manuscripts by Threlkeld and Mann.

In 2010, Amanda Lissarrague and I published a study of the language sources referred to by Capell,<sup>33</sup> and in the last several years I have had the opportunity to undertake a re-analysis of these materials, in collaboration with two other linguists.<sup>34</sup> We expect to be able to publish full accounts of them in the near future, so here I will limit myself to a brief summary of what we can now add to the information already available on the works dealt with by Capell, namely, Threlkeld (c. 1824), Larmer (c. 1832) and Mann (1842).

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<sup>29</sup> Capell 1970:21, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Fraser 1892:ix.

<sup>31</sup> Kuringgai on pp. 21, 23, 24; Guringai on pp. 21, 23; Carigal on p. 23 (twice). The likely reason for the spelling of Guringai as "Guringai" on the map is that the cartographer had difficulty representing the phonetic symbol  $\eta$ .

<sup>32</sup> Larmer's vocabulary was probably collected in 1832 and 1833. SLNSW holds two versions, both dating from a later period. See under "Larmer" in the References section below..

<sup>33</sup> Wafer and Lissarrague 2010. See also Wafer and Lissarrague 2008:160-164.

<sup>34</sup> Sharon Edgar-Jones and Albert Burgman.

Map 9



Capell map (1970:22)

## 10. Threlkeld and “the Karree manuscript”

The State Library of NSW has made many elusive language resources available online as part of its “Rediscovering Indigenous Languages” project.<sup>35</sup> One of these is a document called “Specimens of the language of the Aborigines of New South Wales to the northward of Sydney”, found in the collection of papers left by Lancelot Threlkeld.<sup>36</sup> It is sometimes called “the Karree manuscript”, because of the occurrence of the word “**Karr,eē**” under the title line.

Capell dated this manuscript to “before 1824”,<sup>37</sup> which can only mean that Threlkeld wrote it during his first visit to Sydney in 1817-18.<sup>38</sup> On his second visit, Threlkeld did not arrive in the Colony until 20 August 1824,<sup>39</sup> and left Sydney to take up his post as missionary in the Hunter River region on 14 January 1825, arriving in Newcastle the following day.<sup>40</sup>

While the earlier date for the manuscript is certainly not implausible, research is still needed to confirm it. In any case, whether Threlkeld collected the words and phrases that make up the manuscript during his first or second visit to New South Wales, the document is very unlikely to postdate his 1825 arrival in the Hunter region, where he was to stay for the next sixteen years.<sup>41</sup> The fact that he calls it “the language . . . to the northward of Sydney” suggests that he probably elicited the language material while he was in Sydney, and was unfamiliar with the region the speaker came from.

The language is very clearly not the Sydney language.<sup>42</sup> Capell believe it was related to Awabakal, but this assessment was based on a comparison of only fourteen words and an analysis of a mere three sentences.<sup>43</sup> My collaborators and I have completed a reconstruction of the whole document, and **on this basis we are able to say that Capell was right. The language of the Karree manuscript is, without any doubt, a dialect of the same language as Awabakal and Wonnarua. We call this language the “Hunter River-Lake Macquarie-Central Coast” language (to avoid privileging the name of any one dialect over the other two), and abbreviate it to “HRLMCC”.**

This is not the place to undertake an exhaustive correlation with Awabakal and Wonnarua. But to aid comparison with the data from Larmer and Mann, we note that the pronouns “I” and “you” were

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/about-library/services/indigenous-services/rediscovering-indigenous-languages-project>

<sup>36</sup> A 382: Reverend Lancelot Edward Threlkeld papers, 1822-1862  
<https://search.sl.nsw.gov.au/permalink/f/1cvjue2/ADLIB110369078>. The Karree manuscript occurs as pp. 130-140, beginning on the 6<sup>th</sup> page after  
[https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=FL3323845&](https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=FL3323845&)

<sup>37</sup> Capell 1970:23.

<sup>38</sup> Threlkeld arrived in Sydney on 12 May 1817 and left again in 1818, in time to arrive at the Society Islands on 11 September of that year.

<sup>39</sup> He arrived on a ship called “Endeavour”, as reported in the *Sydney Gazette* of 26 Aug 1824, p.2.  
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2183158>.

<sup>40</sup> Threlkeld, *Journal 1824-1825*:1.

<sup>41</sup> There are at least two reasons for making this assumption. One is that the spelling system Threlkeld used for the Karree manuscript has some shortcomings that he corrected in his later work at Lake Macquarie. And if he wrote the document at the latter location, he would not have used such a vague expression as “to the northward of Sydney”.

<sup>42</sup> As described by Troy 1994 and Steele 2005,

<sup>43</sup> Capell 1970:25, 26-27.

given by Threlkeld's informant as **Āt,wǎr** and **Īn,dōōr**.<sup>44</sup> Threlkeld's failure to recognise that these words had an initial consonant, written in a contemporary orthography as *ng*, is one of the indications that the manuscript predates his work at Lake Macquarie, where he became adept at recognising this sound (written by phoneticists as *ŋ*).

In the manuscript itself there is no indication of the speaker's identity, but it is likely to have been Bungaree.<sup>45</sup> Bungaree was originally from the Central Coast but moved with his family to Sydney's northern shore some time in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup> His practice of greeting newly arrived ships would have enabled him to be the first Aboriginal person Threlkeld met in Sydney, and his ability to converse freely with the passengers would have recommended him to Threlkeld as an informant.

Our understanding of the word "**Karr,eē**" that occurs under the title line of the manuscript is that it probably means "**salt water**".<sup>47</sup> But it also had a more specific meaning at Broken Bay. We conjecture that it referred to the **tidal stretch of the Hawkesbury River**, where the water changes from fresh to salt. **The word was probably given to Threlkeld in response to a question about where the speaker (or his language) came from.**

#### 11. Larmer

James Larmer arrived in New South Wales in 1829 and joined the Surveyor General's Department as a draftsman. In 1835 he was appointed assistant surveyor and he retired in 1855.<sup>48</sup> The manuscript vocabularies held by the State Library appear to be copies (one made in 1853 and the other much later in the century<sup>49</sup>) of a now lost original of 1834, based on field work Larmer carried out between 1831 and 1834. In the earlier (handwritten) recension, the sections relevant to the present discussion are headed "Brisbane Water - Tuggera beach Lakes" (pp. 1-3), and "Hunters River, Brisbane Water & Newcastle" (pp. 4-7).

As Capell pointed out, the language is clearly a dialect of HRLMCC, and accords with the linguistic data in the Karree manuscript. On page 2, the pronouns for "you" and "me" are given as **Indore** and **Attore**. These are undoubtedly Larmer's attempts at transcribing the HRLMCC free pronouns *ngintuwa* and *ngatjuwa*. (As we have seen above in the case of Threlkeld, it is a characteristic of early 19<sup>th</sup> century transcriptions that the sound *ng*, when it occurred at the beginning of a word, was not heard by the transcriber and therefore omitted.)

Both these words occur in the section of the manuscript headed "Brisbane Water - Tuggera beach Lakes". **It is therefore a serious error that the data from Larmer have been included as a source for**

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<sup>44</sup> MS page numbered 137. In the current orthography these are rendered as *ngatjuwa* and *ngintuwa* (e.g. Lissarrague 2006:40).

<sup>45</sup> See Smith 2004:20-21.

<sup>46</sup> See Smith 1992.

<sup>47</sup> We base this on the occurrence of the word **kariwa** "sea" in the handwritten Larmer manuscript dated 1834 (p. 5). The suffix *-wa* is probably an augmentative.

<sup>48</sup> <https://search.slnsw.gov.au/permalink/f/1cvjue2/ADLIB110363816>

<sup>49</sup> The later copy is typewritten, which suggests it would have been made in the 1880s or later.



the *Darkinyung grammar and dictionary*.<sup>50</sup> (The relevant pronouns in Darkinyung are *ngindi* for “you” and *ngaya* for “I”.<sup>51</sup>)

## 12. **Mann**

John Frederick Mann arrived in Sydney on 6 March 1842 and was appointed as a licensed surveyor in the Surveyor-General's Department on 1848.<sup>52</sup> The manuscript held by the State Library<sup>53</sup> is headed with the words “Aboriginal Names by J.F. Mann”. This is followed by “Australian Aborigines - A few notes on their language etc/ Information obtained from Long Dick an influential native of the Cammeray tribe a son of Bungaree and Queen Gooseberry”.

In his thesis on Eora clans, historian Keith Smith writes as follows: J. F. Mann, “whose brother Gother Kerr Mann was police magistrate at Gosford, first met Cora Gooseberry Bungaree (Queen Gooseberry) and her son Boio while surveying at Brisbane Water in 1842 . . . As Mann did not mention any subsequent meetings with Boio, he presumably obtained the vocabulary from him in 1842.”<sup>54</sup>

The diagnostic features that enable the language of this manuscript to be easily identified as HRLMCC include the free pronouns **Ninghtois** “you” and **Naghtois** “me, myself” (p. 2), and the bound pronoun **ban** (p. 3).<sup>55</sup>

## 13. *The Horton/ AIATSIS map*

In 1996 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies published a map prepared by David Horton called “Aboriginal Australia”, which recognised “Kuring-gai” as a distinct dialect. (See Map 10, below, which reproduces the relevant section from Horton’s map.) Like Fraser and Mathews before him, Horton divided the whole country into regions. Kuring-gai is located in the region called “Southeast”, which extends from the Queensland border along the whole coastline of NSW, then west along part of the southern coast of Victoria. The regions are subdivided (and colour coded) on the basis of “Tribal/Language group name”.

Horton’s map is better informed linguistically than its predecessors, and its use of the term “Kuring-gai” indicates that the author had read Capell and been persuaded by the relevant linguistic data. The area covered by this “tribe/language group” includes not just the Central Coast, but most of the country between the north shore of Port Jackson and the Hawkesbury River. This, too, reflects Capell’s understanding of the geographical spread of the language.

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<sup>50</sup> Jones (2008:7). G. Ford (2010:180-185, 242) is quite scathing about the abuse of statistics that enabled Jones to commit this mistake. (Note also the other critiques of Jones’s work in Ford’s thesis, especially the section entitled “*Darkiñung* Language Taught as ‘Darkinjung’ on the Coast - Instead of Local Language”, pp. 304-308). Jones has made a different kind of error in her incorporation of vocabulary from the first page of the Milson manuscript, where she failed to analyse the short song text in Eliza Dunlop’s handwriting. The text and accompanying word-list are clearly HRLMCC, not Darkinyung.

<sup>51</sup> Jones 2008:28.

<sup>52</sup> <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mann-john-frederick-4144>

<sup>53</sup> <https://search.slnsw.gov.au/permalink/f/1ocrdr/ADLIB110333214>

<sup>54</sup> Smith 2004:19-20.

<sup>55</sup> Mann’s transcription of the free pronouns is evidently influenced by French, where the syllable he writes as *ois* would be pronounced as *wa*. The words are clearly intended to represent *ngintuwa* and *ngatjuwa*. In our contemporary orthography, the bound pronoun form of “I” (first person singular nominative) is written as *-pang*. In the Karree manuscript, Threlkeld transcribed it fairly consistently as **būng** (40 occurrences).

Map 10



Detail from eastern NSW section of Horton map (1996)

Nonetheless, while there is good evidence that this dialect was spoken on the Central Coast, more work needs to be done to establish that it was also spoken south of the Hawkesbury. As far as I'm aware, there are few language sources that could be used for this purpose, except for a scattering of placenames.<sup>56</sup>

#### 14. Kuringgai or Guringai: what's in a name?

Guringai Tribal Link Aboriginal Corporation was established in 2003 to represent Aboriginal people whose ancestors came from the Central Coast region, and a number of its members are descendants of Bungaree.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, it is their prerogative to decide on the name they use for their organisation, and for the language that their ancestors spoke.

Nonetheless, there has recently been some scurrilous public criticism of this usage, particularly by Mr Robert Syron,<sup>58</sup> who appears to believe that the Guringai have fraudulently adopted the name of his own dialect group, which is usually spelt as "Gringai". There is no discernible logic in Mr Syron's argument. The two groups are clearly associated with quite distinct locations (Gringai being situated north of the Hunter) and are recognised as speaking distinct dialects.

<sup>56</sup> There are a number of placenames on the Central Coast that are demonstrably based on words that occur in the Guringai dialect of HRLMCC, for example: Ourimbah (*wurin-pa*, "place of a bora ground"), Terilbah (*tarila-pa*, "place of fishing nets"), Wyong (*wayung*, "yam"). So far there has been little attention given to the placenames of likely Indigenous origin between Port Jackson and the Hawkesbury. The matter merits further research.

<sup>57</sup> See <https://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/north-coastal/growing-recognition-guringai-heritage>

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Syron 2019.

The use of words that sound similar (or even the same) but have different meanings is universal, and it occurs in Aboriginal Australia as it does everywhere else. For example, the name “Wanudjara” is used for both the Nakako language of Western Australia and the Pitjantjatjara language of South Australia.<sup>59</sup> This doesn’t mean that either group would claim to occupy the same location or speak the same dialect as the other. **In short, Mr Syron’s attack on the use of the term “Guringai” by the people who call themselves by that name appears to be an exercise in intimidation and bullying, without any plausible foundation.**

#### 15. *Other cases of faulty logic*

One of the most widely known of the sources that have been used to justify the Darkinjung takeover of the Central Coast is Nerida Blair’s 2003 report *Darkinjung - our voices, our place. A report to AIATSIS*, based on research carried out under the auspices of the University of Newcastle. Because it has been so influential, it merits consideration here.

The main, glaring failure of Blair’s report is that she takes her conclusion for granted in her premises. She provides a fair account of the history of Aboriginal people on the Central Coast, but no evidence whatsoever that they were called (or thought of themselves as) Darkinjung. She simply assumes, with exemplary circular reasoning, that because they were on the Central Coast, they had to be Darkinjung.<sup>60</sup>

#### 16. *Conclusion: “truth-telling”*

The foregoing account of the language history of the Central Coast is, to a large extent, such a sorry saga of misunderstandings, blunders and confusion, that I have seriously questioned my own ability to get it straight – or, simply put, to tell the truth.

What has kept me going is the advice of a friend who said “Leave it to Country”. Because, in the end, it will be Country that decides. The ancestors know which language they spoke, and they still exercise their power through language, however long it has been asleep, in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I have undertaken the writing of this report at the request of the Guringai Tribal Link Aboriginal Corporation, in the hope that it will enable the voices of the ancestors to be heard once again on the land now known as the Central Coast of NSW. My concern here is only with language. I have made no attempt to untangle the complex web of family relationships that has led people to identify with one language name or another. That would be a different exercise requiring a depth of local knowledge that I make no claim to having. Nor am I in a position to undertake the necessary research, which has, in any case, already been carried out for the Awabakal and Guringai People’s native title claim. The relevant documentation, which I understand was written by anthropologist Natalie Kwok, is not public, and I have not seen it.

In the matter of language, however, I take all responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation.

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<sup>59</sup> Tindale 1974:307; cf. pp. 249, 217,

<sup>60</sup> G. Ford’s MA thesis gives examples of the same circular logic in other research projects carried out at the University of Newcastle. “The ‘historians’ doing research for the university did not check the identity, merely substituting the word ‘Darkinjung’ for Central Coast ‘Aborigine’” (Ford 2010:308-309 note 21). Ford excuses the university’s wider involvement in the Darkinjung takeover of the Central Coast as “unwitting”.

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