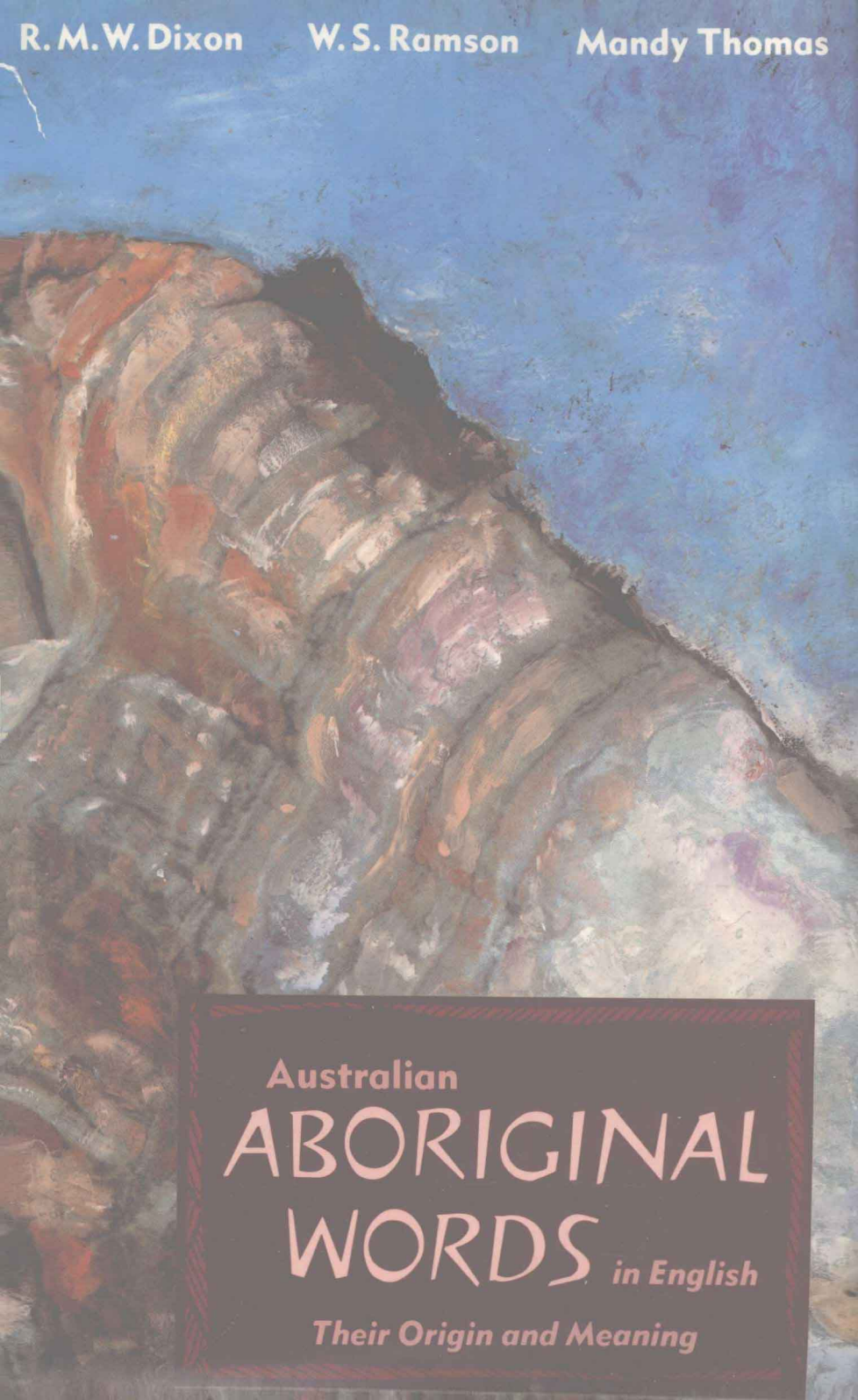
R. M. W. Dixon W. S. Ramson Mandy Thomas



Australian ABORIGINAL WORDS in English

Their Origin and Meaning

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Australian ABORIGINAL WORDS *in English*

Their Origin and Meaning

Guide to the English pronunciation of the borrowings

List of symbols used

Vowels		Diphthongs		Consonants	
i	h<u>ea</u>t	eɪ	h<u>ay</u>	p	<u>p</u>at
ɪ	h<u>i</u>t	oʊ	h<u>oe</u>	b	<u>b</u>at
ɛ	b<u>e</u>t	aɪ	h<u>igh</u>	t	<u>t</u>ap
æ	b<u>a</u>t	aʊ	h<u>ow</u>	d	<u>d</u>ot
a	p<u>ar</u>t	ɔɪ	t<u>oy</u>	k	<u>c</u>at
ɒ	h<u>o</u>t	ɪə	t<u>ier</u>	g	<u>g</u>oat
ɔ	s<u>or</u>t	ɛə	d<u>are</u>	f	<u>f</u>at
ʊ	p<u>u</u>t	ʊə	t<u>our</u>	v	<u>v</u>at
u	h<u>oo</u>t			θ	<u>th</u>in
ʌ	h<u>u</u>t			ð	<u>th</u>at
ɜ	h<u>ur</u>t			s	<u>s</u>at
ə	<u>a</u>noth<u>er</u>			z	<u>z</u>ap
				ʃ	<u>sh</u>ot
				ʒ	mea<u>s</u>ure
				tʃ	<u>ch</u>ur<u>ch</u>
				dʒ	<u>j</u>oke
				m	<u>m</u>at
				n	<u>n</u>ot
				ŋ	ri<u>ng</u>
				l	<u>l</u>ong
				r	<u>r</u>ing
				h	<u>h</u>ang
				y	<u>y</u>oung
				w	<u>w</u>ay

Preface

DICTIONARIES of English—up to and including the *Macquarie Dictionary* (1981)—have included loan words from Australian Aboriginal languages and just said 'native Australian' or 'Aboriginal' without any attempt to identify which of the 250 or so distinct Australian languages a given word came from. This is rather like lumping together all loans into English from French, German, Spanish, Russian, Greek etc., as 'European'.

In 1978 W. S. Ramson began planning the *Australian National Dictionary* (*AND*) and R. M. W. Dixon agreed to assist with the etymologies of words borrowed from Australian languages, utilising the files he had been building up since 1973 (with the assistance of grants from the Australian Research Grants Committee) that gathered together all material—published and unpublished—on each Australian language. In 1980 Ramson employed David Wilkins to assess materials on Dharuk, the Sydney language, from which the greatest number of loans come.

In 1984 Random House, planning the second edition of their unabridged dictionary, asked Dixon to supply information concerning just over 100 loans from Australian languages, detailing the language from which each word came, and its original phonetic form and meaning in that language. This was done, in late 1984, by Clare Allridge, working as Research Assistant to Dixon, using Dixon's files and the work Wilkins had done on the Sydney language. The *Random House Dictionary*, published in September

1987, thus became the first dictionary to include precise etymologies of loans from the Aboriginal languages of Australia.

In 1985 Ramson prepared a comprehensive list of about 400 loans from Australian languages for which there would be entries in the *Australian National Dictionary*. During 1985 and 1986 Linda Macfarlane and Lysbeth Ford, employed by the *AND* project, combed Dixon's files for the origins of these words, building on the earlier work of Wilkins and Allridge. The *AND*, published in September 1988, made this information available for the first time.

The first draft of the present book was written by Mandy Thomas, except chapter 4 which was by Ramson. All chapters were then revised and rewritten by Dixon, in consultation with Ramson and Thomas. In particular, Dixon undertook a thorough reassessment of the etymologies in chapter 3, making a number of corrections and additions to the information given in the *AND*. A number of further loans were added, in the course of this investigation. Most of the quotations included in chapter 3 are taken from the *AND* but a number have been added, from additional sources, for this volume.

Work on a topic such as this is cumulative, building on previous scholarship. We owe a considerable debt to such works as *Austral English, a Dictionary of Australasian Words, Phrases and Usages* by E. E. Morris (Macmillan, 1898) and *Australian Aboriginal Languages* by Barry Blake (Angus and Robertson, 1981) as well as the many handbooks on fauna and flora, anthropological texts, and grammars and dictionaries that we have consulted.

We have also depended on the help of many people. First of all, the foundational etymological research of Wilkins, Allridge, Macfarlane, and Ford. Then, a draft of the complete book was read by Barry Blake, Alan Dench, and Luise Hercus, and of chapter 3 by Peter Austin and Gavan Breen, each of whom provided the most useful corrections and additions. Phil Rose gave assistance with the pronunciations of the words in English. Nicolas Peterson read the entire draft from the point of view of an anthropologist. We hope this book will appeal to a wide range of readers, including schoolchildren; Mary Besemeres read the draft as a sample member of the latter group and her comments were really helpful.

Individual etymological queries and suchlike were answered by Paul Black, Neil Chadwick, Tamsin Donaldson, Wilf Douglas,

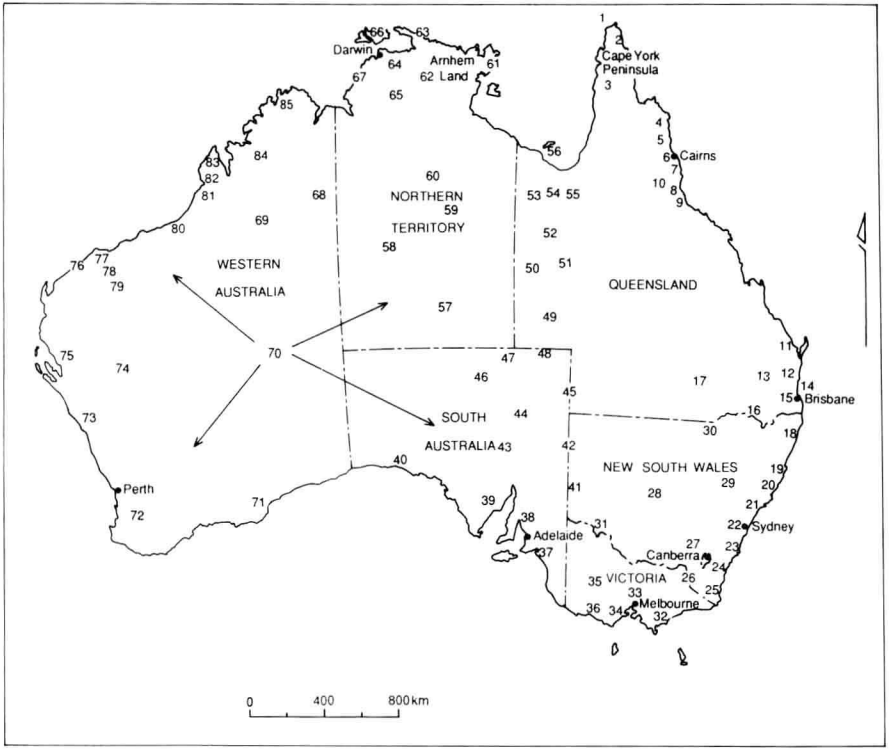
Nicholas Evans, Kevin Ford, Ian Green, Jean Harkins, Mark Harvey, Jeffrey Heath, John Henderson, Tony Johns, John McEntee, Francesca Merlan, Frances Morphy, Alice Moyle, David Nash, Nick Reid, Bruce Rigsby, Alan Rumsey, Jane Simpson, Gerda Smith, and Dorothy Tunbridge.

Jeanette Covacevich, Senior Curator (vertebrates) at the Queensland Museum read through the fauna section and also had relevant parts read by other curators: Wayne Longmore (birds), Steve Van Dyck (mammals), Rolly McKay (fishes), and Geoff Monteith (insects). John Calaby, of the CSIRO Wildlife Division, read the entire fauna section and made the most valuable suggestions for improvement and addition, providing detailed historical information from his files. Tony Irvine, of the CSIRO Tropical Forest Research Centre (in Atherton, north Queensland) and Beth Gott of the Department of Botany and Zoology, Monash University, read the whole flora section and made invaluable comments and corrections.

We owe a tremendous debt to all of these friends and colleagues, for the unstinting assistance they provided in their areas of special knowledge.

Finally, a note on pronunciation. Different languages have different habits of articulation, which must be clearly distinguished. On page vi we give the phonetic symbols, in terms of which the pronunciation in English of the loans is shown, for each entry in chapter 3. The phonetic alphabet we use for representing the original forms of the words in Australian languages is described on pages 14–18 of chapter 1.

We have attempted, in this book, to give accurate information concerning the major loans from Australian languages into English. There must surely be some things we have missed, and there may be additional words that could be included. We invite our readers to send further data, and suggestions, to us at The Australian National Dictionary Centre, The Australian National University, GPO Box 4, Canberra, ACT, 2601, Australia.


Darwin
Arnhem Land
Cape York Peninsula
Cairns
NORTHERN TERRITORY
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
QUEENSLAND
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
NEW SOUTH WALES
VICTORIA
Brisbane
Sydney
Canberra
Melbourne
Adelaide
Perth
0 400 800 km

Key to approximate locations of those Australian languages mentioned in this book

Adnyamathanha 43
Arabana 46
Aranda 57
Awabakal 21
Baagandji 41
Bandjalang 18
Banggala 39
Bardi 83
Bigambil 16
Dharawal 23
Dharuk 22
Dhurga 24
Diyari 44
Djangati 19
Djaru 68
Djingulu 60
Dyirbal 7
Gabi-gabi 12
Ganay 32
Gaurna 38
Gowar 14
Gunwinygu 62
Gunya 17
Gureng-gureng 11
Guugu Yimidhirr 4
Guyani 43
Kalaaku 71
Kala Lagaw Ya 1
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Karadjeri 81
Kattang 20
Kuku-Yalanji 5
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Margu 63
Martuthunira 76
Mayi-Kulan 55
Mayi-Kutuna 53
Mayi-Yapi 54
Midhaga 49
Ngamini 48
Ngarigo 26
Ngarluma 77
Ngiyambaa 28
Nhangka 40
Nhanta 73
Nyangumarda 80
Nyawaygi 9
Nyungar 72
Pajamal 67
Panyjima 79
Pitta-pitta 51
Thawa 25
Tiwi 66
Ungarinjin 84
Waga-waga 13
Walmatjari 69
Wangganguru 47
Wangka-Yutjuru 50
Waray 65
Warlpiri 58
Warrgamay 8
Warumungu 59
Warungu 10
Wathawurung 34
Watjari 74
Wemba-wemba 35
Western Desert language 70
Wik-Mungkan 3
Wiradhuri 27
Wuna 64
Wunambal 85
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Yuwaalaraay 30

Contents

1

An introduction to Australian languages

AS SPEAKERS of any language come into contact with strangers, who show them new animals, plants, tools, and so on, they are likely to 'borrow' names for the new things from the strangers' language. (These are called 'borrowings' or 'loan words'.) Over the centuries English has borrowed many words—*mosquito* comes from Spanish, *balcony* from Italian, *pyjamas* from Hindi, *ketchup* from Malay. Captain Cook returned in 1771 from his great voyage of exploration and brought with him news of a quite unusual animal and the name it was called by Aborigines at the Endeavour River in New Holland. It was *kangaroo*.

When the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove in 1788 they soon adopted into English words from Dharuk, the local language—*dingo* for the native dog, *wombat* for a thick-set burrowing marsupial, *waratah* for a plant with remarkable red flowers, and *boomerang* for a weapon that they at first thought to be a kind of sword but was later discovered to be thrown in a curved path, to kill an animal. As new settlers came to Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Brisbane, and then spread out into the interior of the continent, more words were taken from local languages into English.

This book tells the story of about 400 words that have come into English from the native languages of Australia. Some of the words are only used in Australia but quite a number have been adopted into the English spoken in Britain, America, and other countries. This first chapter gives a short account of the nature of Australian

languages, and explains the ways in which we tried to determine which language each borrowing comes from, how it was pronounced, and what it meant in the original language. Chapter 2 provides short sketches of those languages from which the greatest number of borrowings have come. The central part of the book is chapter 3, in which the loan words are arranged into sections such as 'fauna', 'flora', 'implements', 'dwellings', with a full account of each. Chapter 4 then describes the ways in which the borrowings were used in English. The final chapter provides a reminder that borrowing always takes place in two directions, and briefly mentions ways in which English words have been adopted into Australian languages.

The native languages of Australia are highly developed instruments of culture, each possessing a wide vocabulary and an intricacy of grammatical forms. The apparent simplicity of the Aboriginal traditional hunting and gathering life-style is in sharp contrast to the elaborateness and complexity of their social and religious life and to the richness of their language. These languages enable Aboriginal people to express subtleties of meaning in any aspect of their cultural lives, from complicated myths to detailed and precise information about the landscape. We hope that something of this richness will be apparent to our readers, as they follow the story of loan words from the original languages of Australia into the new language, English.

THE ABORIGINES AND THEIR LANGUAGES

The first discovery and settlement of Australia was made by Aborigines, at least 40 000 years ago. They soon spread out over the whole continent and probably numbered between one and two million by 1788. They were divided into about 700 separate groups, which have traditionally been called 'tribes.' Each had its own territory, its own political system and laws, and its own language and legends (though these were often interlinked)—just like the nations of Europe, but on a smaller scale.

The tribe-nations of Australia differed from political groupings in Europe and Africa in one important way—they did not have a single 'king' or 'chief', or a hierarchy of officers. No one was richer than anyone else, or had any right to order others around. Everyone

in a tribe co-operated in the business of everyday life, and in artistic activity and ritual. Each person had certain obligations depending on their age and sex, and on the particular kinship relations they bore to others.

The boundary of each group's territory was usually a natural barrier such as a mountain range or a strip of barren country. The size of the territory generally depended on the kind of terrain. Where food was scarce, as in many inland regions, the area of land occupied by a tribe was much larger than that in the rainforest or in a fertile river valley.

A tribe was divided into a number of 'local groups', each of which considered that it belonged to one part of the territory. Just south of Cairns, the Yidinyji tribe had a 'coastal group', associated with the country around what are now the towns of Edmonton and Gordonvale, and a 'mountain group', living for most of the year on the Atherton tableland around what are now Yungaburra and Kairi. In the summer, when the weather is humid and unpleasant on the coast, the yellow walnut (*ganggi*) and a type of edible lawyer cane (*Calamus moti*, the species name being based on the Yidiny name *mudi*) would be ripe on the tableland and the whole tribe would gather there. In the winter, when there might be frost on the mountains, the quandong (*murrgan*) and black walnut (*digil*) would be ready on the coastal flats and the mountain people would come down to share in this feast. Ceremonies such as initiation would be performed at such times, when the whole tribe was assembled in one place because food was plentiful during that season.

Often, a tribal name is based on the name of the language the tribe speaks—the people speaking Yidiny are called the Yidinyji (literally: Yidiny-'with'). Just occasionally, a language name may be based on a tribal name—the Ngarinyin people in the Kimberley area of Western Australia speak the Ungarinyin language. Some names have a straightforward etymology (for example, some names of languages in south-east Queensland, such as Gabi-gabi, and some in Victoria, such as Wemba-wemba, just involved a doubling of the word for 'no' in that language, *gabi* and *wemba* respectively). For other names no etymology is known.

Again just like the nations of Europe, each Australian tribe is proud of having its own language. But sometimes the 'languages' (as speakers perceive them) of a number of neighbouring tribes may be

mutually intelligible; as a linguist uses the term 'language' they are really dialects of one language. A similar situation applies in Scandinavia, where Danish and Norwegian are considered separate languages on political grounds, because they are associated with distinct nations, but in fact a Dane and a Norwegian, each speaking their own language, can understand each other fairly well, showing that these are dialects of a single language (if 'language' is defined on linguistic criteria).

At the time of first European contact there were about 250 languages in Australia. Some were spoken by a single tribe; others had a number of dialects spoken over a group of adjoining tribes.

Linguists have shown that most of the languages of Europe, west Asia and north India are related and belong to one language family, called Indo-European. They all developed from a single ancestor language, which is thought to have been spoken about six thousand years ago, between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. The linguistic methods that were used to prove the relationship of Indo-European languages have recently been applied in Australia. It appears that all of the 250 original languages of this continent belong to one language family, being descended from a single ancestor language that was spoken many thousands of years in the past. No relationship has yet been discovered between the Australian language family and languages spoken elsewhere in the world.

HOW THE LANGUAGES HAVE FARED

During the 200 years of white occupation of Australia there has been a steady loss of Aboriginal languages. Each decade there are fewer languages spoken, and the total number of people speaking an Australian language has diminished.

There have been a number of reasons for this decline. In some cases white people forbade the use of indigenous languages. In many missions and government settlements children were separated from their parents at an early age and placed in boys' and girls' dormitories where only English was allowed; children heard speaking their native language would be punished. Sometimes it was by choice that Aboriginal people spoke to their children only in English, feeling that this was the best way to fit them for survival in what had become a white person's world. The influence of radio, TV,

newspapers, magazines, and books, all in English, has also hastened the switch from Australian languages.

One way of killing a language is to get rid of all the speakers. In a few places in Australia there were massacres of such severity that there were literally no speakers left to pass a language on to the next generation. There is known to have been a language called Yeeman spoken around Tarooma in south-east Queensland. That is all we know—its name. Not one word of the language was recorded before the entire tribe was wiped out in 1857.

About half of the original languages of Australia are no longer spoken or even remembered, except in some cases through a couple of dozen words retained in the English spoken by descendants of the original tribe. Perhaps a hundred more languages are still spoken but only by a small number of people, and few or no children are learning them.

There are just a couple of dozen languages which are still in active use in most aspects of everyday life and are being learnt by children. Even these languages are at risk of dying out in the next century unless particular steps are taken to assist their speakers to retain them in an English-dominated world. These include the establishment and proper management of bilingual education programmes in schools; the production of primers, dictionaries, written versions of traditional legends, videos, and radio programmes; and, above all, the development of a feeling of pride in the languages. The federal and state governments are giving some help but a great deal more needs to be done.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE LANGUAGES

When Governor Phillip arrived in Sydney Cove he carried a word list of the 'New Holland language' taken down by Sir Joseph Banks eighteen years before. This had actually been collected at the Endeavour River, two thousand miles north of Sydney, but Banks evidently believed that a single language must be spoken over the whole continent. Phillip was surprised that the local Aborigines recognised none of the words from Banks' list (for more details on this see the entry on *kangaroo* at page 67 in chapter 3).

The mystery was solved three years later when Phillip led a small expedition—including some members of the Sydney tribe—40

miles to the north-west, the furthest exploration then attempted. As Phillip wrote in a letter to Banks: 'It was a matter of great surprise to me when I first arrived in this Country, to find that the words used by the natives when you was [sic] here, were not understood by the present inhabitants, but in my last little journey, I found on the banks of the Hawkesbury, people who made use of several words we could not understand, and it soon appeared that they had a language different from that used by those natives we have hitherto been acquainted with . . . I now think it very probable that several languages may be common on different parts of the coast, or inland . . .'. Phillip realised, at last, that Aborigines in different parts of the continent spoke different languages.

The next advance in understanding came in 1841 when the explorer George Grey recognised recurrent similarities among the multitude of languages of the continent. First, as he put it, 'a general similarity of sound and structure of words in the different portions of Australia, as far as yet ascertained'; and secondly, 'the recurrence of the same word with the same signification, to be traced, in many instances, round the entire continent, but undergoing, of course, in so vast an extent of country, various modifications' (Grey's *Journal of Two Expeditions*, Vol. II, pp. 208–216). Just one of Grey's findings was that the word for 'water' at Adelaide was *kauw-ee* and at Perth *gab-by*, but the people a dozen miles from Perth had *kow-win*, a word very similar to that used at Adelaide.

From about 1875 until 1910 there was a flurry of interest, with all sorts of people gathering information on Aboriginal culture and languages before—as they believed at that time—the Aboriginal race became extinct. In 1878 the Melbourne meteorologist and public servant R. Brough Smyth published a mammoth two-volume work *The Aborigines of Victoria*; in 1879 the missionary George Taplin included forty-three Aboriginal vocabularies and much other information in *The Folklore, Manners, Customs and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines*; clergyman John Mathew had fifty vocabularies from all over the continent in his 1899 book on the origin of the Aboriginal race *Eaglehawk and Crow*; and in 1886 Edward M. Curr, who had been a pioneer settler in northern Victoria, put out the four-volume work *The Australian Race*, including 250 vocabularies from all over the continent sent in by policemen, mining wardens, station owners, and others.