



## Wollangambe: The river that's really a mountain

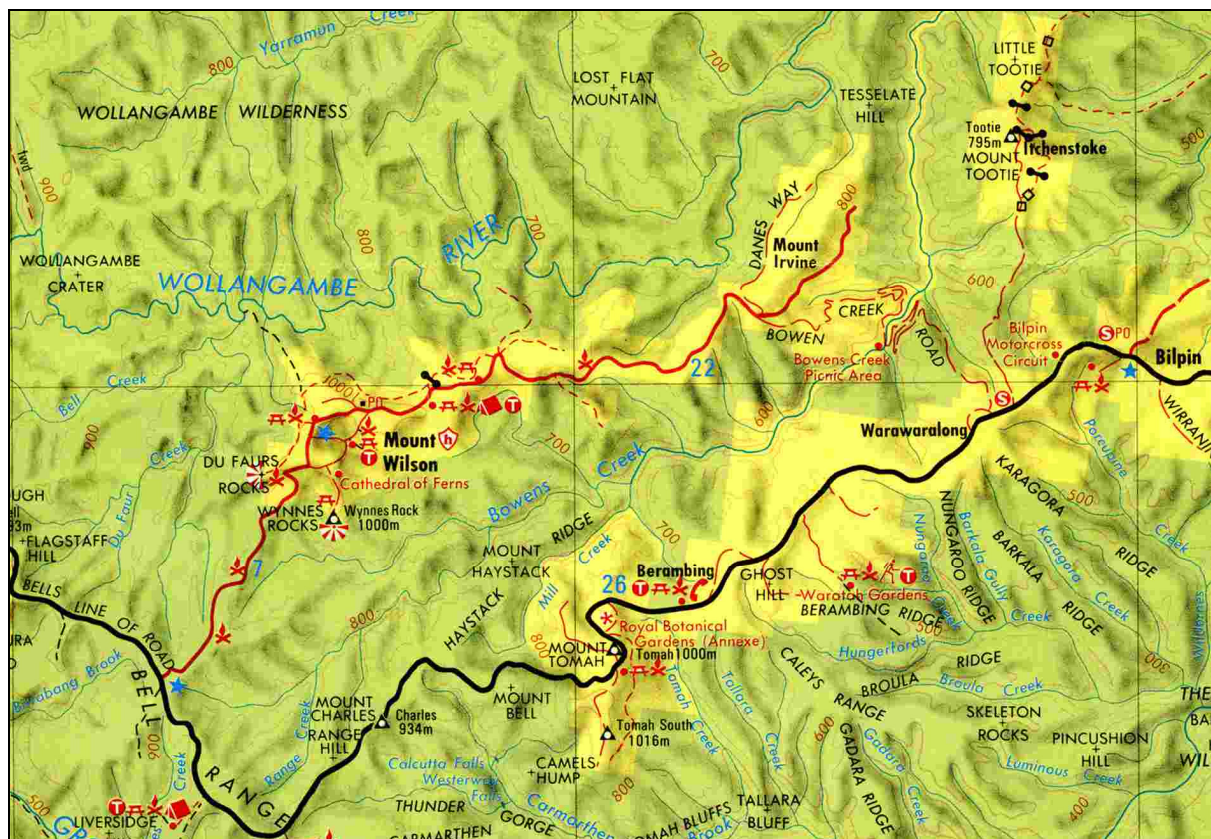
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### Abstract

Cartographic error in the 1830s led to the application of the Aboriginal name "Wollangambe" to the now well-known river in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. The name really belongs to the adjacent eminence now named Mount Irvine.

### Introduction

Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine are extensive basalt-capped mountains to the north of the Bell Range. They are the prominent features on the range that runs between the Wollangambe River from its tributary Bowens Creek.



**Figure 1: Locality map**

Mount Wilson was so-named in 1868, after Mr John Bowie Wilson, Member of the Legislative Assembly and Secretary for Lands. Wilson was born in Irvine, Scotland, a fact which is believed to have given rise to the name Mount Irvine. (Geographical Names Board 1970; Lyons 1976)

Wollangambe River rises on the Newnes Plateau to the west of the above mountains and flows past them before continuing northwards to join the Colo River. The Geographical Names Board states that its length is 50 kilometres, though I have calculated it to be almost 70 kilometres.

The river's name has generally been thought to be the appropriate Aboriginal name. Until recently I was under the impression that the name made its first appearance on Major Mitchell's famous 1834 map of the Nineteen Counties, presumably determined by one of his surveyors working in the vicinity. (Mitchell 1834)

### **Mitchell's surveyors**

The first Europeans known to have reached Mounts Wilson and Irvine were Assistant Surveyor William Romaine Govett and his convict assistants, in 1832. Govett was under instructions from Surveyor General Major Mitchell to map all the ridges leading towards the Colo River from the Bell Range west of Mount Tomah and from Newnes Plateau. In the case of Mounts Wilson and Irvine, however, when he encountered the "almost impenetrable (sic) scrub" he gave up and probably did not complete their full traverse. (Andrews 1978; Govett 1833) The following year Draftsman Frederick Robert D'Arcy, also surveying for Mitchell, traversed the two mountains completely on his most adventurous way to survey the course of the Wollangambe River further north. (Macqueen 2010)

Both Govett and D'Arcy drew maps of the area which contributed to Mitchell's map. (Govett 1833; D'Arcy 1833a; Mitchell 1834) Neither Govett nor D'Arcy put names on their maps for the eminences that are now known as Mounts Wilson and Irvine, nor for the Wollangambe River (though someone added "Wollangambe Creek" to Govett's map in pencil at some much later time). D'Arcy, however, labelled Bowens Creek as "Bowens Creek": presumably that name had been established as a result of the fact that George Meares Countess Bowen had lived at Berambing since 1830, on land he had applied for in 1828. (Hungerford 1995, p31)

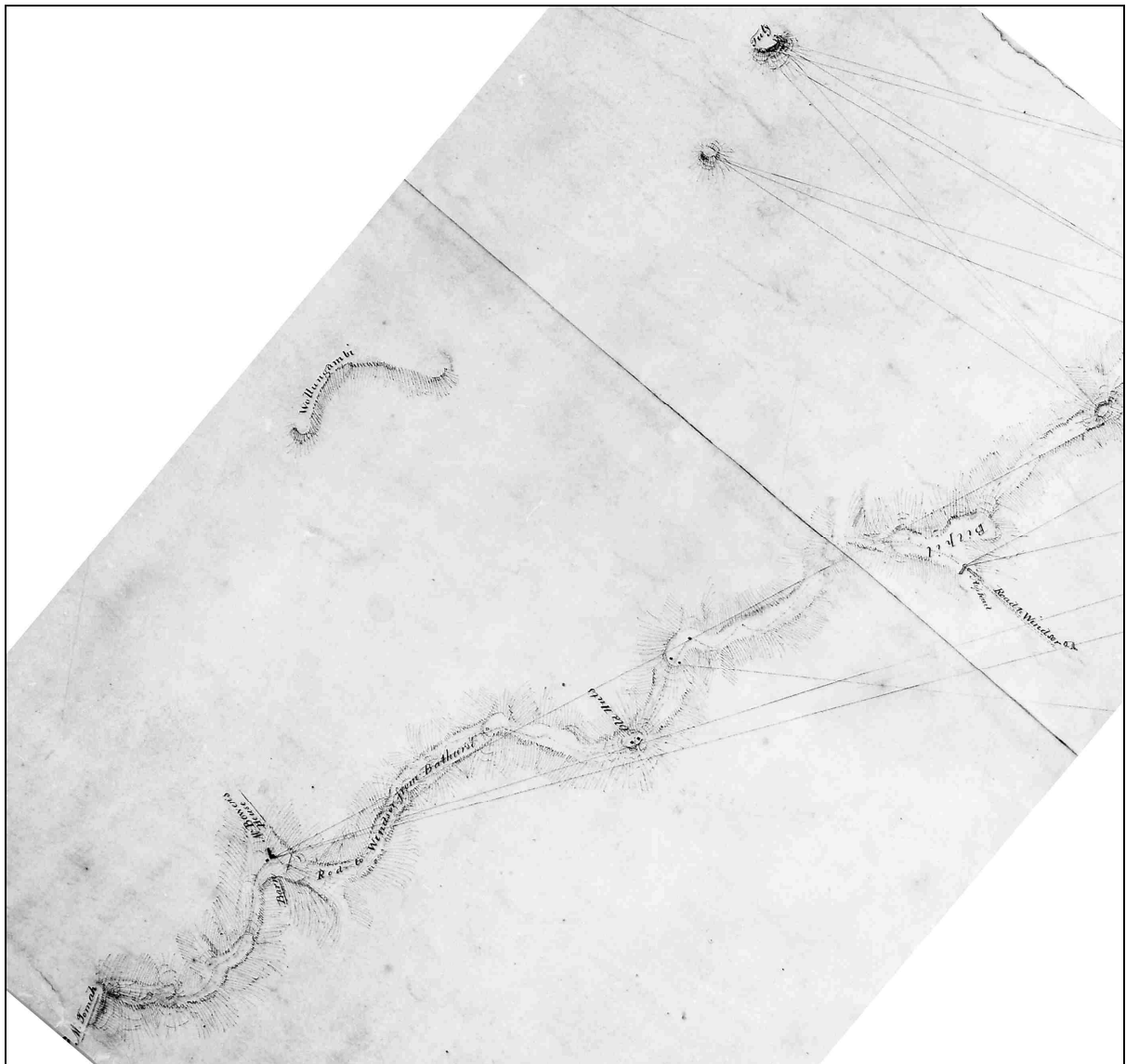
Nor did any names for the two mountains ever arise in the extensive correspondence between those two gentlemen and their boss Mitchell. As for the Wollangambe River, Govett's correspondence makes no mention of the river in any way, while D'Arcy referred to it as the "western branch of Bowens Creek". (D'Arcy 1833b)

No other surveyor prior to 1834 was engaged in surveying or mapping the Wollangambe River area. In 1823 Assistant Surveyor Robert Hoddle passed nearby when he surveyed Archibald Bell's route along the Bell Range, but his field book, his report, and his map make no mention of any sort of the mountains now known as Wilson and Irvine, or the river known as Wollangambe. (Hoddle 1823a, 1823b, 1823c) Archibald Bell made no mention of them either, though he did ascertain the name of Mount Tomah from his Aboriginal guides. (Bell 1823)

However, another surveyor did work nearby. In 1832 Assistant Surveyor Peter Grant Ogilvie, another of Mitchell's men, surveyed the range from Mt Tomah down past Bilpin and Mountain Lagoon to Upper Colo, and thence up towards Putty. (Andrews 1992; Ogilvie 1832)

When researching for my biography of D'Arcy, I was preoccupied with the part of that map which shows Ogilvie's confusion in the Colo River area and paid little attention to the corner showing Mount Tomah. Only more recently did I realise that that corner is of particular interest. Among other things it depicts Mount Tomah, Tootie and Little Tootie, labelling the former mountain "M. Tomah" and the latter "Tuty". It also shows a mountain which it labels "Wollungambi". (Figure 2) When Ogilvie's map is overlaid on

modern maps it transpires that his [Mount] Wollungambi corresponds precisely to the higher parts of Mount Irvine.



**Figure 2: Portion of Assistant Surveyor Peter Ogilvie's map (tilted to orient to north on the page) (Ogilvie c1832)**

Wollungambi certainly appears to be an Aboriginal name. Ogilvie was under instruction, as were all Mitchell's surveyors, to where possible ascertain Aboriginal names for features which they mapped. Unfortunately Ogilvie's field book has not survived (and nor have Govett's and D'Arcy's), and Ogilvie's surviving correspondence does not address his work in this area at all. It is possible that he ascertained the name (and that of Mount "Tuty") directly from Aboriginal people, but it is more likely that he learnt it from George Bowen at Berambing. Bowen is believed to have been acquainted with Aboriginal people familiar with the area. (Hungerford 1995, p4) From them he probably determined the name of the mountain that loomed large on the other side of Bowens Creek.

As with most Aboriginal names, the precise traditional meaning and application of Wollungambi has to be regarded with circumspection owing to cultural and communication difficulties. While Ogilvie clearly thought it related to Mount Irvine, it may for instance have been the name for the whole Mount Wilson-Irvine massif. However, it is very unlikely to have applied to our Wollangambe River, as the valley which that river winds through is completely invisible from the parts of the Bell Range

with which Bowen and Ogilvie were familiar: it is hidden by Mount Irvine and the range on which it stands.

### **Mitchell's map**

If Ogilvie, Mitchell's surveyor, attached the name "Wollungambi" to today's Mount Irvine, how is it that Mitchell's 1834 map has the name "Wollunganbe" attached to Wollangambe River? (Figure 3) The answer, I believe, is that it was not meant to refer to the river at all. Firstly, there is no designation such as "River", "Creek", "R" or "C" attached to the name. Inspection of the whole map reveals no other river or creek without such designation. Many mountains and hills, however, carry an Aboriginal name without a designation such as "Mount".



**Figure 3: Portion of Surveyor General Mitchell's map (Mitchell 1834)**

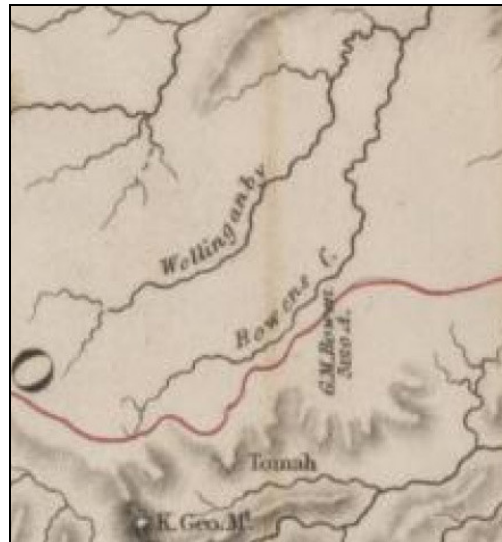
Secondly, when the map is examined carefully, the word "Wollunganbe" does not follow the river in the best precise manner that the map's expert engraver, John Carmichael, usually adopted. Rather, it can be seen that the name wraps somewhat around a mountain depicted on the map, in a style quite consistent with the labelling of many other mountains on the map. The mountain concerned is today's Mount Irvine.

It appears therefore that, based on the evidence from Ogilvie, it was Mitchell's intention that the *mountain* be named "Wollunganbe", not the river. The variation in spelling need not concern us, as there are countless other examples of confused spelling in the history of the development of the map, in some cases due to mistake, in others because Mitchell thought he knew better than his surveyors.

### **Dixon's Map**

In 1837, Robert Dixon, another of Mitchell's surveyors, having taken leave in England, published an unauthorised map to rival Mitchell's. To a large extent it was a copy of Mitchell's map, but it had cadastral information added, making it much more useful. This caused uproar at the time, but that's another story. (Brock 2006) Crucially in this story, Dixon seemingly had not seen Ogilvie's map and misunderstood the intention on

Mitchell's map. He placed the name "Wellinganby" unmistakably along the river, and on the other side of the river, thereby divorcing it from Mount Irvine. (Figure 4) He did not offer a name for Mount Irvine (or Mount Wilson). His choice of spelling is curious—one might wonder whether he deliberately departed from Mitchell's spelling to suggest that Mitchell's map was not his source. However, there is no other source Dixon could have used. He himself never surveyed in the vicinity, and indeed his depiction of the supposed course of Bungleboori and Nayook Creeks is just as wildly in error as was Mitchell's—thanks to Govett having faked much of his work. (Andrews 1978)



**Figure 4: Portion of Surveyor Robert Dixon's rival map (Dixon 1837)**

Dixon did not add a designation to the name, apparently considering that this watercourse did not need one—or being unsure whether it was supposed to be a creek or a river.

When the first map of the County of Cook was published around 1843, it labelled the river "Wellinganby Creek", thus adding a designation. (Fig 4) (Anon c1843) It adopted the same spelling as Dixon, which suggests that Dixon's map was the source. Again, no name was offered for Mount Irvine.

A comprehensive search has not been undertaken to find out when the current spelling "Wollangambe" first appeared. However, it is noted that in 1858 a Police District of "Wollangambe" was established. (NSW Govt, 1858) The Parish of Wollangambe was probably established before that, though the oldest surviving map of the parish is apparently dated 1883. (Lands 1883) It is curious that the spelling reverted to something more like Ogilvie's original, while the name did not revert to the mountain feature.

Meanwhile, the designation "Creek" persisted on the parish maps and, as far as can be ascertained, on all other map varieties, until 30 May 1975 when the Geographical Names Board decided that it deserved the status of "River". This was just in time for the printing of the first edition of the 1:25,000 topographic map "Wollangambe". (Geographical Names Board 1975; Land Information Centre 1976)



## Conclusion

The Aboriginal traditional name for Mount Irvine is probably "Wollangambe" (or "Wollungambi"). "Wollangambe" is almost certainly not the Aboriginal name for the nearby stream which now, famously, carries the name. The blame for this historical error seems to be attributable largely to the 1837 cartographic work of Surveyor Robert Dixon, and to a lesser extent on some ambiguity on the part of the engraver of Major Mitchell's 1834 map.

The Aboriginal name for the river will probably never be known, as is the case with many other streams in the Colo catchment—with the apparent exception of the Wolgan River; Angorawa, Coorongooba, Putty, Tootie, Wirraba and Wollemi Creeks; and the Colo River itself. Other names including Barakee, Boorai, Bungleboori, Dumbano, Dooli, Girribung and Nayook were applied during the twentieth century but have no known relevance in the area.

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