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THE BLUE MOUNTAINS: WHERE ARE THEY?

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Abstract

When the name 'Blue Mountains' was first applied in New South Wales in 1789 it referred to the extensive ranges that were visible from, and bounded, the colony. It was widely considered in the nineteenth century that the Blue Mountains extended from the Goulburn area in the south to the Hunter Valley in the north. Today the name is applied in various ways, but usually in a very local sense. This evolution reflects the cultural history of the region. Today's official definition validates the evolved narrative that Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson completely crossed the Blue Mountains in 1813.

Key Words: Blue Mountains, definition, Greater, National Park, maps, explorers.

Introduction

If people standing at Echo Point or Mount Tomah are asked where they think the Blue Mountains extend to in the landscape before them, a very diverse response is obtained.

Few people today have a clear idea of the coverage of the Blue Mountains ([Figure 1](#)), and that has been the case since the colony began.

It is not a trivial question. For over two centuries the name 'Blue Mountains' has been entwined with the story of the region, and indeed of New South Wales. But if the name has had different meanings at different times or in different contexts, it is necessary to understand those meanings if history is to be properly interpreted.

Origin of the name

In the earliest weeks of the colony European names were assigned to particular portions of the ranges visible to the west. Having observed the most prominent eminences to the west-north-west, which included Mounts Hay, Banks and Tomah, Phillip wrote in May 1788:

"The most northern of them he named Carmarthen Hills, the most southern Lansdown Hills; one which lay between these was called Richmond Hill." (Phillip 1789, p.99).

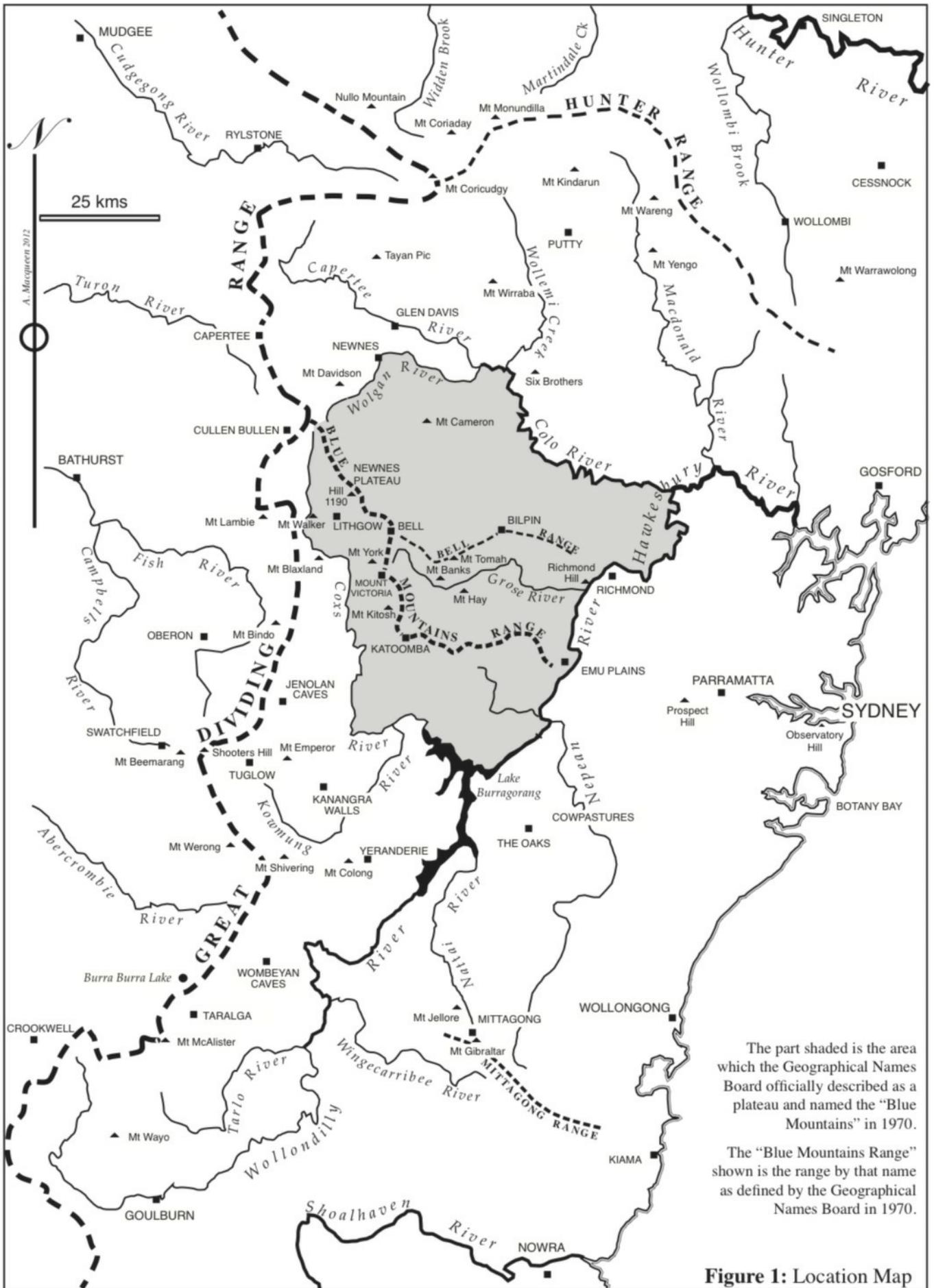
He had probably first named these 'Hills' when he was standing on Prospect Hill on 26 April 1788 (Andrews 1999, p.160). Surgeon John White then wrote:

"From the top of this hill we saw a chain of hills or mountains, which appeared to be *about* thirty or forty miles distant, running in a north and south direction. The northernmost being conspicuously higher than the rest, the governor *Governor* called it Richmond Hill; the next, or those in the centre, Lansdown Hills; and those to the southward, which are by much the lowest, Carmarthen Hills." (White 1790, p.130; Andrews 1999, p.160 italics entries).

White's version of the names was different from Phillip's. This need not concern us, except to say that the then Richmond Hill could not have been the lowly hill next to the Hawkesbury River which Phillip visited a year later and assigned the same name.

It was during that trip up the Hawkesbury that one of Phillip's entourage, Captain John Hunter (later Governor Hunter), noted,

"We frequently, in some of the reaches which we passed through this day, saw very near us the hills, which we suppose as seen from Port Jackson, and called by the governor the Blue Mountains." (Hunter 1793, p.150).



The part shaded is the area which the Geographical Names Board officially described as a plateau and named the "Blue Mountains" in 1970.

The "Blue Mountains Range" shown is the range by that name as defined by the Geographical Names Board in 1970.

Figure 1: Location Map

Hunter's remark is contained in observations of about 5 July 1789 (his dates are confused), and is the earliest known documentation of the name Blue Mountains. The *reason* for the name is clear, and was expressed in 1793 by Judge Advocate Collins:

“... , the western mountains, (commonly known in the colony by the name of the Blue Mountains, from the appearance which land so high and distant generally wears,) ...” (Collins 1798, p.312; Chapter XXI, pp.225-226 in 2nd Edition).

It is conjectural whether Phillip thought of the name during the 1789 expedition or beforehand, and indeed whether he thought it up himself or took it from his officers or the common populace. However, the view of one historian that it originated from “the seductive power of the vulgar.” and came “to the written record, as early as 1793-96,” is respectively unfounded and incorrect (Atkinson 1997, p.191).

Regardless of who first uttered the name, it has been very plausibly suggested that it was prompted by familiarity with the sight of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, which would have been known to Phillip and other naval officers in the colony who had visited the West Indies (Dunphy 1969, pp.10-11).

A day or two after Hunter's first reference to the name, Phillip and his party stood on Richmond Hill and Hunter observed

“... we were not more than five or six miles from a long range of mountains ... This range of mountains we supposed to be those which are seen from Port Jackson, and called the Blue Mountains: they limit the sight to the west-north-west. In that range of high land there is a remarkable gully, or chasm, which is seen distinctly at a distance, and from which we appeared to be distant about five miles. The hills on each side of this gap were named by Governor Phillip; on one side the Carmarthen, on the other, the Lansdown hills; and that on which we stood was called Richmond-hill.” (Hunter 1793, p.151).

It is clear that while the Carmarthen and Lansdown Hills were specific parts of the mountains, the name Blue Mountains referred to the whole range as “seen from Port Jackson”.

What could they see from Port Jackson? As one can verify today, a person standing on Observatory Hill would have seen what appeared to be one blue hazy range extending far to the south. In fact, a multiplicity of ranges is involved. The most southern visible point in the ranges west of the Wollondilly River was the summit of Mount Colong (near Yerranderie). Further south, those ranges were obscured by the ranges around the Nattai River (and the Earth's curvature). Even further southward, in the Mittagong direction, the view was obscured by close high ground around Leichhardt. To the north, the view terminated at about Mount Tomah, owing to the interruption of high ground on the North Shore.

Phillip had had more expansive views from Prospect Hill, west of Parramatta. In the Mittagong direction the view was not interrupted by close hills, but by the high country around Mittagong itself (featuring Mounts Gibraltar and Jellore). The Nattai country again obscured the view of the ranges west of the Wollondilly, the most southerly visible point in those ranges still being Mount Colong. This time the view to the northward extended to ranges north of the Colo River, though the more remote heights such as Mounts Coricudgy and Yengo were obscured thanks to the curvature of the earth.

Today, a person armed with binoculars, compass and map can pick out many of the features and interpret the views (though most of Prospect Hill has regrettably been removed for its blue metal and we can no longer obtain the exact historic view from there). The early observers could only discern that the mountain country extended an indefinite distance. The illusion that they faded in height further south or north did not fool them, however. Watkin Tench was no doubt fully aware of the tricks played by perspective and the curvature of the Earth when he visited Prospect Hill in 1789 and observed

“... a view of the great chain of mountains, called Carmarthen hills extending from north to south farther than the eye can reach.” (Tench 1789, p.111).

While the names Carmarthen and Lansdown gradually disappeared, the notion of an extensive but somewhat indefinite Blue Mountains persisted through the early decades of the colony. The name was synonymous with the ill-defined barrier that was perceived as constraining the colony.

Some specific references, taken out of context, might suggest that the Blue Mountains consisted only of the parts closest to Sydney. For instance, when Colonel Paterson planned to take boats up the Grose River in 1793 he referred to his “journey to the Blue Mountains” (Paterson 1793). However, that does not imply that the Blue Mountains were limited to that vicinity. Some nine years later Ensign Barrallier understood the Nattai, Yerranderie and Kanangra country to be part of the “Montagnes Blues”, according to his journal (Barrallier c1805, Entry of 25 November 1802, p.796). Further correspondence by Barrallier and Governor King suggests that their Blue Mountains were considered to be the whole range that was thought to terminate as far south as the latitude of Jervis Bay (Macqueen 1993, p.87).

Perhaps the earliest attempt to properly describe the extent of the Blue Mountains was by another explorer, George Bass. During the famous expedition down the coast to Bass Strait, at Kiama on 7 December he wrote

“The Blue Mountains, in short, appear to be nothing more than a body of mountains that, getting up somewhere to the northward – where, we cannot tell, but not very far, I am well convinced, on the north side of Port Stephens, perhaps at Cape Hawke – run southerly in about a S.b.W. or S.S.W. direction as far as the Cow Pastures, and then turn away eastward and come to the sea 18 or 20 miles to the southward of Botany Bay. Their breadth where they come to the sea is about 25 or 30 miles, but I suspect that as they advance northward their breadth decreases.” (Bass 1797-1798, p.315).

In stating that the Mountains came “to the sea” Bass was referring to the Illawarra escarpment. His idea of a considerable northern extent to the Blue Mountains is consistent with that of Lieutenant Grant, who while standing on Mount Hunter in the Hunter Valley (between Maitland and Singleton) in 1801, wrote that he could see

“... the Blue Mountains, which we saw until lost to the eye, stretching in a northerly direction into the interior.” (Grant 1801, p.408).

Colonel Paterson — formerly Captain Paterson — was present with Grant, as was Ensign Barrallier, and presumably both concurred with Grant’s use of the name (Macqueen 1993, p.60).

According to the visiting Frenchman François Peron, the Blue Mountains

“envelopes the whole county [of Cumberland] in a sort of semicircle” (Peron 1809, p.285.).

This notion is not consistent with the extensive northern extent described above, but it does fit Bass’s idea that the range came to the sea south of Botany Bay.

If we accept Bass and Peron’s versions, John Wilson and his companions certainly crossed the Blue Mountains, as then defined, in two expeditions in early 1798. The party negotiated the upper Nepean and Nattai country, at one time summiting Mount Jellore (834m), and crossed the Mittagong Range: having thus passed all barriers they proceeded almost to the site of Goulburn (Brownscombe 2004, pp.60-81). Unfortunately the party’s diarists did not mention the name Blue Mountains and we do not know what Wilson himself thought about it. He was an illiterate convict and was murdered soon afterwards, so he had no opportunity to trumpet his achievement.

Few maps produced in the first 30 years of the colony shed light on the definition of the Blue Mountains, which is not surprising given the limited understanding of the topography. Neither Barrallier nor Caley placed the name on their maps and sketches, though it is clear from his writings that Caley, like Barrallier, thought the Blue Mountains covered a broad area.

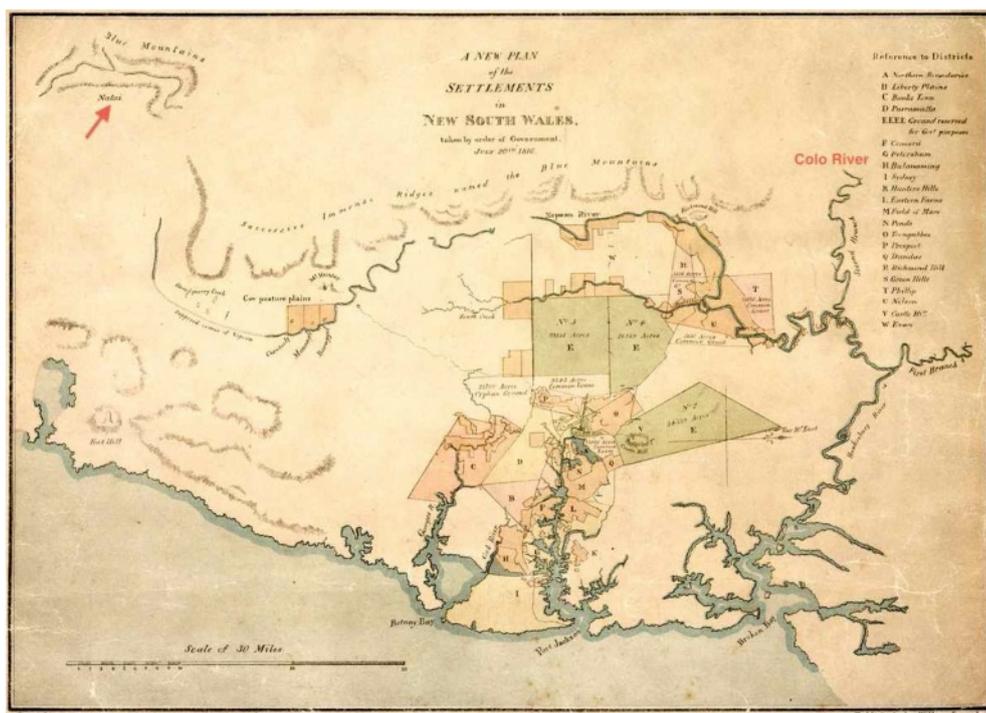


Figure 2. William Dymock's 1810 map of the settlements (Dymock 1810).

A series of maps produced in 1810 'by order of the government' variously by John Booth, Robert Rowe and William Dymock indicate that the Blue Mountains, described as "successive immense ridges", lay along the parts from west of the Nattai River in the south, almost to the Colo River in the north. However, given that that was the extent of the maps, it is not to be assumed that the Blue Mountains were not considered more extensive (Dymock 1810). (Figure 2).

Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson

Despite the entrenched narrative which holds that Blaxland and friends completely crossed the Blue Mountains, the men themselves did not *at the time* claim to have done so. While Blaxland's journal declares that the purpose was to

"effect a passage over the Blue Mountains" (Richards 1979, p.67), the outcome of the expedition, according to the same journal, was simply that

"... they had sufficiently accomplished the design of their undertaking, having surmounted all the difficulties ..." (Richards 1979, p75).

Wentworth admitted

"... we have not actually traversed the Mountains [though] we have at all events proved that they are traversable ..." (Richards 1979, p114).

Macquarie at first evaded the question, in the one document declaring that the trio had

"... effected a Passage over the Blue Mountains, ..." (Macquarie in Campbell 1814, col.2), and that he had sent George Evans

"... to discover a passage over the Blue Mountains, ..." (Macquarie in Campbell 1814, col.1).

It was only while he himself was making the journey to Bathurst in 1815 that he decided to set the goalpost at Mount York, which, although being the point where he found himself descending from the sandstone plateau, is well short of the watershed of the Great Dividing Range to the west. He wrote in his journal:

"Here we halted for a little while to view this frightful tremendous pass, as well as to feast our eyes with the grand and pleasing prospect of the fine low country below us and now in view from this termination of the Blue Mountains" (Macquarie 1815, 29 April 1815).

This has come to be relied on as proof that the explorers completed the crossing of the Blue Mountains when they descended from Mount York. One prolific historian has cited it as evidence that Macquarie's divine service at Coxs River was the first held to the west of the Blue Mountains (Havard 1935, p.70).

However, Macquarie seems to have had a change of heart. He never published his original journal. In the edited version published soon after his trip he refrained from defining the termination of the Blue Mountains, stating that Mount York represented

“... only the abrupt termination of a ridge.” (Macquarie in Campbell 1815, p.1, cols.2-3), and that the explorers had merely crossed

“... the most rugged and difficult part of the Blue Mountains.” (Macquarie in Campbell 1815, p.1, col.1).

Possibly Macquarie was not entirely objective in this moving of the goalposts. It may be that he decided the credit for the complete crossing should be given to Surveyor George Evans, whom Macquarie had despatched to further the explorers' finds, rather than credit the explorers themselves, who were private citizens who had acted on their own initiative (Lavelle 2002, p.47).

On the other hand, Macquarie may have changed his mind after reflecting on the broader topography. On descending from Mount York he was still in a coastal catchment. He found that he yet had to cross a series of “very lofty hills and narrow valleys” involving “numerous steep ascents and descents” before he was across the Great Dividing Range (Macquarie 1815, 1 May 1815).

Macquarie suggested that the Blue Mountains was a barrier that extended 80 miles (*129 km*) south and north of Port Jackson — virtually from Goulburn to the Hunter Valley (Macquarie in Campbell 1815). This is consistent with the concept mentioned by Wentworth eight years later, that the Blue Mountains was a

“chain of mountains” which “run from North to South, dividing the Eastern and well settled part of the Colony from the great Western Wilderness, ...” (Wentworth 1823, col.2 footnote).

Such concepts of considerable north-south extent do not sit well with the idea of a western terminus at Mount York, short of the Great Dividing Range, and Macquarie quite probably realised that.

In short, notwithstanding Macquarie's journal entry, the collective evidence does not support the idea that in 1813-1815 there was a definitive view that the Blue Mountains terminated at Mount York. That such a view developed later reflects the evolving mythology concerning the whole crossing event.

Nineteenth century maps

One might think that as further exploration brought an improved understanding of the topography, a more precise definition of the Blue Mountains might have developed. On the contrary, the situation remained as hazy as the mountains themselves.

Perhaps the first informative map was “A map of New South Wales: from the best authorities and from the latest discoveries 1825” (Tyrer 1825). It shows the “Blue Mountains Range” essentially extending from the Mount Colong area in the south, almost to Scone in the Hunter Valley (Figure 3).

While examining hundreds of maps available on-line via the Australian National Library's Trove website, the author identified 41 maps, published by 17 different cartographers between 1825 and 1903, that seem to label the Blue Mountains in a meaningful way. Most are maps of the whole of New South Wales, and only one is specifically a map of the Blue Mountains. That map, an 1885 tourist map (Figure 4), takes in all the Coxs River and Kanangra country in the south, the Newnes Plateau in the north, Oberon and Tarana in the west, but only Lawson in the east (Cooper 1885). It does not attempt to show a boundary as such, and as with all tourist maps the coverage has obviously been selected on the basis of the area of tourist interest: the cartographer may well have accepted that the Blue Mountains covered a greater area than shown.

The southern extent of the Blue Mountains as indicated on the 41 maps varies from the Goulburn area to the Jenolan Caves-Coxs River area, while the northern extent is generally either the Capertee and Colo Rivers, or the Hunter Range or Hunter Valley. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the findings.



Figure 3. Portion of James Tyrer’s 1825 map of NSW (Tyrer 1825).

Table 1. Southern extent of the Blue Mountains.

Location	Number of maps where this location is suggested as the approximate southern extent
Goulburn or Wombeyan Caves or Taralga	27
Mount Werong-Mount Colong	11
Jenolan Caves-Coxs River	3

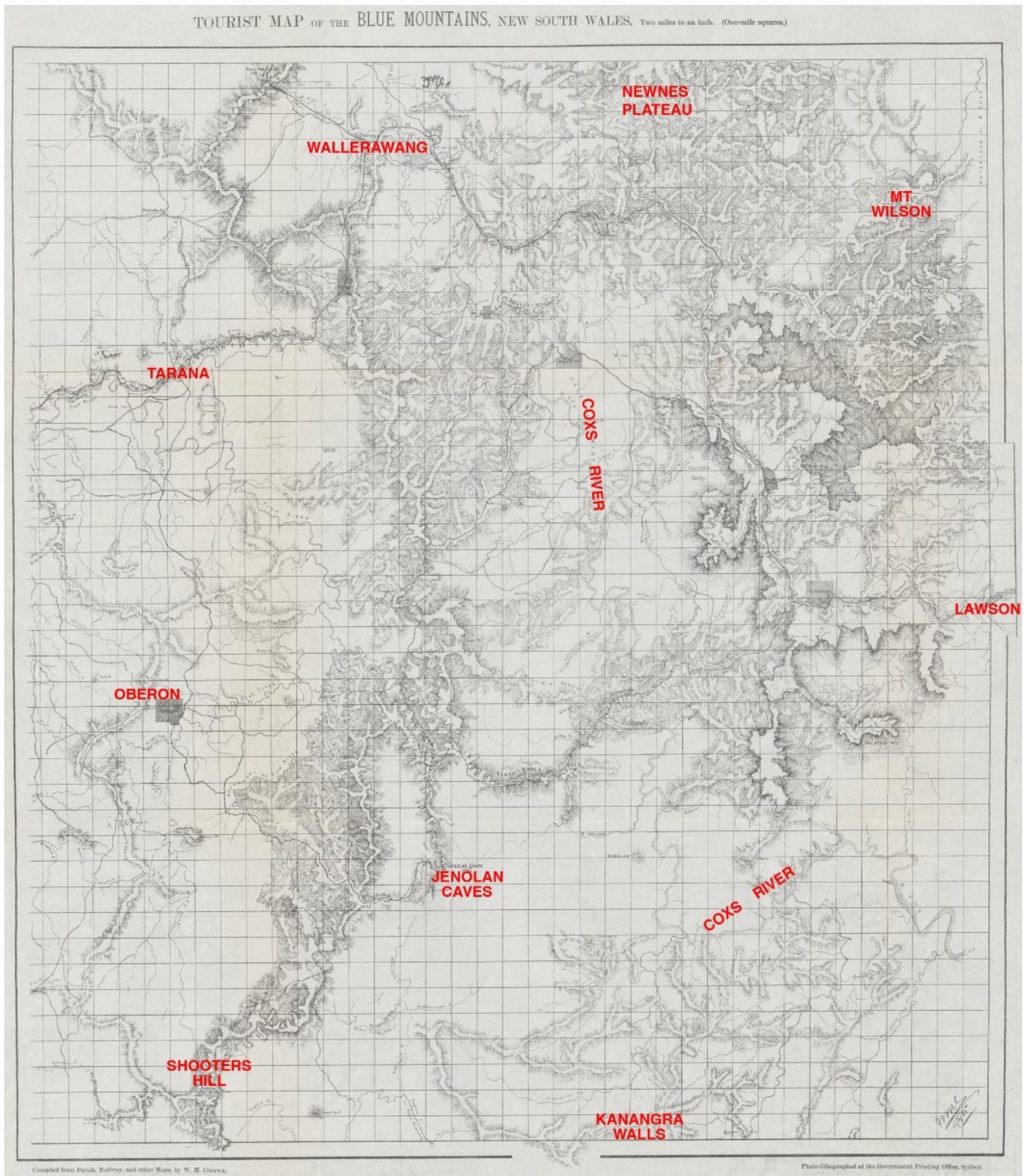


Figure 4. William Cooper’s tourist map of the Blue Mountains (Cooper 1885).

Table 2. Northern extent of the Blue Mountains.

Location	Number of maps where this location is suggested as the approximate northern extent
Capertee River-Colo River	25
Hunter Range or Hunter Valley	12
Other	4



Figure 5 provides an example of a map depicting a Blue Mountains roughly from Taralga to the Hunter Range (Hughes 1870).

While this analysis was not rigorous, it can be seen that nineteenth century cartographers overwhelmingly considered the Mountains to extend at least as far as Mounts Werong and Colong in the south. To the north, nearly all cartographers considered the Mountains to extend at least as far as the Capertee and Colo Rivers. As to the eastern and western extent, in most cases the intent is obscure. An 1882 Bartholomew map of Australia depicts the Blue Mountains following the Great Dividing Range from west of Goulburn to around Capertee, as opposed to the more ‘mountainous’ terrain to the east of the divide which appears to be the target of most maps (Bartholomew 1882).

Figure 5. Portion of William Hughes’ 1870 map of NSW (Hughes 1870).

No temporal trend could be found in the extent of the Blue Mountains as indicated by the 41 maps. Fourteen of them were by John Bartholomew or his son John George Bartholomew, in the period 1850 to 1903, and there is no consistency or trend even within those.

The prevailing cartographic notion of an extensive Blue Mountains did not suddenly die out in 1903. For instance, maps in a 1920 atlas variously showed that the Blue Mountains extended from Crookwell to Rylstone, Tuglow to Newnes; and Tuena (northwest of Crookwell) to Mudgee (Philip 1920).

Nineteenth century textual references

There are countless textual references to crossing the Blue Mountains, or places and events in the Blue Mountains, but very few provide a meaningful interpretation of the extent of the Mountains.

Some writers equated the Blue Mountains to the entire Great Dividing Range. An official party exploring the Brisbane River in 1825 reported

“... ; the Blue Mountains apparently distant about ten leagues.” (Gray 1825)

and an 1851 article first published in *The Times* about the gold discoveries in Australia mentioned that the Blue Mountains extended from

“... the 38th degree of south latitude to the Tropic of Capricorn, ...” (Anonymous 1851, col.1).

Another article had the Blue Mountains running from New Guinea down to Tasmania! (Anonymous 1847, col.4). A little less ambitious, *Wells' Gazetteer* of 1848 was content to limit it to the New South Wales portion of the Divide (Wells 1848, p.294). Such ideas did not persist into the second half of the century.

Consistent with the mapping evidence however, the concept of a Blue Mountains extending from the Goulburn area to the Hunter was quite common and enduring in textual material. It was a logical definition, for it is in the Goulburn area and the Hunter Valley that the Great Dividing Range is interrupted significantly and easy passage to the west is afforded. Alexander Berry took this view when he wrote about the regional geology in 1827 (Berry 1827, col.1) while an article of 1844, derived from the *Penny Cyclopaedia*, stated that the sandstone country in the area of the Goulburn River (a tributary of the Hunter)

“... is to be considered as a portion of the Blue Mountains, ...” (Anonymous 1844, col.1).

An 1855 article stated that Charles Throsby, when he reached Bathurst in 1819 by crossing the divide south of Taralga, had rounded “... the south-western termination, ...” of the Blue Mountains instead of crossing them (Anonymous 1855, col.5), while a later article by the botanist Rev William Woolls mentioned that the high country around Mittagong was

“... an easterly spur of the Blue Mountains” (Woolls 1865, col.1).

In contrast is the view apparently held by the visitor Paul Edmund Strzelecki, who travelled the region in 1839. An analysis of his subsequent writings suggests he considered the

“sandstone locality commonly called Blue Mountains” (Strzelecki 1845a, p.57)

to be limited to the vicinity of today's Great Western Highway and perhaps the Bell Range (Strzelecki 1845a, pp.41-42). However, his accompanying map carries a label suggesting the Blue Mountains extended at least to Kanangra Walls in the south and to the Wolgan and Colo Rivers in the north (Strzelecki 1845b). (The confusion may have arisen from the fact that the map was actually drawn by John Arrowsmith based on Strzelecki's detailed mapping: possibly Arrowsmith was imposing his own view.).

Surveyor General Mitchell unfortunately refrained from both placing the name on his maps and proposing a formal definition (Mitchell 1834). The same may be said of Surveyor Robert Dixon and his 1837 map (Dixon 1837). However, there are two pieces of text suggesting Mitchell considered the Blue Mountains extended in effect from Goulburn to the Hunter. One is contained in a published 1833 description of his trigonometrical survey, almost certainly written by Mitchell himself, which states:

“on the west to Mount Macalister (*sic*), Werong, Murruin [*Shivering*], Colong, Jenolan, Mount Hay, and Mount Tomah, which are the highest points of the Blue Mountains;” (Anonymous 1833, p.49).

The other is his description, in a field book, of the view from Mount Warralong, near Newcastle, in which he refers to

“Tomah and the Blue Mountains on the West with Yengo and Werong [*Wareng*]” (Mitchell 1828, Frame 0022, entry for Monday 14 July 1829).

He was looking past Mounts Yengo and Wareng towards the Wollemi country from the Colo River north to the Hunter Range.

The author has found no official government document that offers a clear definition. It is however interesting that an 1829 government notice stated that a particular area of land at the confluence of the Hunter and Goulburn Rivers (that is, near Denman) was

“bounded ... on the South by the Blue Mountains; ...” (NSW Government 1829, col.3).

A most detailed description of the geography of New South Wales was published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1870. It portioned the Great Dividing Range in New South Wales into the New England, the Liverpool, the Blue Mountain, the Cullarin, the Gourock, the Monaro and the Muniong Ranges, thereby clearly defining the Blue Mountains as the Goulburn to Hunter portion. It further stated

“(3) *The Blue Mountain Range* is subdivided into the three Chief Lateral Branches of - 1. Hunter Range; 2. Mittagong Range; and 3. Macquarie Range.” (Anonymous 1870, col.2.).

Bailliere's 1866 New South Wales Gazetteer proposed an expansive view of the Blue Mountains, while acknowledging — significantly — that a much more limited definition was in common use. It stated:

“The portion of the great dividing chain, generally known by this name, is very limited in extent, but in these pages will include all the mountainous tract stretching from the Liverpool range to Lake Burrah Burrah [near Taralga], south of the 34th parallel.” (Whitworth 1866, p.53).

This is the only nineteenth century reference that the author has encountered that mentions a tension between a broad and a localised definition. Perhaps with this tension in mind, the gazetteer's cartographer did not label the Blue Mountains at all on its accompanying map.

The fact that this acknowledgement of a commonly-used limited definition appeared in 1866 contradicts an assertion by bushwalking conservationist Myles Dunphy that the localised definition first emerged in the tourism era in the 1870s after the railway crossed the mountains (Dunphy 1969, p.34). Nevertheless, nineteenth century textual references proposing a limited Blue Mountains are rare. Strzelecki's view poses one example. Another possible example is the following from 1843:

“The Blue Mountains to the west of the Nepean, form a series of mural precipices from the Cowpastures to the Colo, traversed by those transverse fissures, through which the rivers in question flow.” (Anonymous 1843, col.3).

The rise of the limited view

Notwithstanding the dominance of maps and texts reflecting an expansive extent, it is clear that by the middle of the nineteenth century there existed a more localised Blue Mountains. It was apparently a colloquial viewpoint, not properly reflected in texts, and it may have irritated many of the educated as it gained acceptance.

How might this colloquial view have arisen? The author proposes six factors:

1. People attached the name to the part of the mountains they were familiar with, either because they had visited or crossed the mountains themselves or because they had heard of places or events on them. The wild parts of the mountains remote from the Western Road were, to most people, a useless and nameless *terra nullius*. As Eleanor Dark suggested, through the thoughts of her character Johnny Prentice, early travellers over the mountains were so affected by the grim reputation of the place that
“All their thoughts would be fixed upon the kind, fertile plains beyond, and they would see nothing in the wild hills and gorges which might tempt them to turn aside” (Dark 2002, p.481).
2. No other name arose to denote the country in the vicinity of the Western Road and Bells Line of Road.
3. The above roads lie across a sandstone plateau famously bounded by huge cliffs. The name became attached to that particular landscape.
4. While tourist maps of the mountains, commencing with Du Faur's 1878 map, naturally covered only the parts most accessible to tourists, people were conditioned to thinking that they showed the whole of the Blue Mountains. In fact, the maps did not purport to do so (Du Faur 1878).
5. Settled parts of the Blue Mountains came to be defined as administrative areas for various purposes. At least as early as 1832 the “Blue Mountain District” was defined, for the purposes of furnishing government supplies, as

“The Bathurst road from Emu Ford to one mile East of Mount Vittoria (*sic*); and all parties between it and the Upper Branch of the Hawkesbury.” (NSW Government 1832, col.2.).

The Blue Mountains Shire was established in 1907. While the boundaries of such areas were based on administrative considerations, people were gradually conditioned to think of them as representing the whole of the Blue Mountains.

6. Finally, the evolving mythology surrounding the expedition by Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth held that the trio had completed the crossing of the Blue Mountains when they descended from Mount York, thereby defining the western extent of the Mountains.

Although the localisation process may have commenced soon after the 1813 crossing, arguably it accelerated rapidly with the tourism era that began to flourish after the railway crossed the mountains in the 1870s.

The corollary to all this is that had the original main route to the west proceeded, say, in the area of Barrallier's explorations, today's 'Blue Mountains' would be very much attached to the likes of Mount

Colong and the rugged Kanangra area, and the sandstone plateau to the north might well have acquired a quite different name, or even become nameless except for its outstanding features — the converse of today's situation. Further, it is conceivable that, had the opening of the interior followed John Wilson's 1798 footsteps to Goulburn, the Blue Mountains might today be the distinctive high points of the Mittagong area.

If Blaxland and friends had taken the Bell Range, and Coxs Road had followed by that route, today's concept of the Blue Mountains would probably be centred at Mount Tomah or Bilpin instead of Katoomba.

The Blue Mountains Plateau

The term "Blue Mountain plateau" was first applied to the localised area by the geologist Reverend William Clarke in the 1860s. The extent of his plateau is not clear, nor is it clear whether he considered the plateau to be the entirety of the Blue Mountains, or simply one part (Clarke 1865, col.1). Three decades later the geologist T.W. Edgeworth David referred to "the plateau of the Blue Mountains proper" and placed it within the following boundaries:

"The southern boundary line is usually fixed at the valley of Cox's River and that of the Warragamba River; and the northern boundary at the Capertee valley and Colo valley." (David 1896, p.41).

Perhaps unaware of the history involving a more expansive definition, David seemed disappointed that the Blue Mountains were so locally defined, pointing out that, geologically, the boundaries were "co-terminus" with those of the extensive sandstones which we would now describe as the Triassic series. As he noted, these sandstones range from the Nowra area to the Liverpool Ranges (David 1896, p.41).

Now, while it seems admirable of David to recognise that the name had become unduly localised, his attempt to tie it to the sandstone has little basis in history. Previous concepts were based on concepts of general topography and appearance, not geology. Phillip named the range before anyone had checked the rocks.

In any event, David confirmed what many had come to believe: that the Blue Mountains were simply the sandstone plateau in the area of the Western Road and Bell Range. The possibility of re-expanding the Blue Mountains into the Lachlan Fold Belt metamorphic rocks to the south became nigh impossible.

David's view was reinforced by other academics, most notably his protégé Professor T. Griffith Taylor. He was so taken with the idea that the Plateau of the Blue Mountains was not mountainous in the classical sense, that he proposed dropping the term "mountains". He wrote

"One would like to see the term "Blue Plateau" introduced into our literature, if that were possible." (Taylor 1922, col.5).

This was ironic. In the process of localising the Blue Mountains, some of the areas most worthy of the name 'mountains' — areas to the north and south which are more dissected or of different geology altogether — had been removed. Deletion of the word 'mountains' would have confirmed the localised definition forever.

Nevertheless, Taylor's Blue Plateau was more extensive than David's plateau. It extended to cover all the elevated sandstone from around the Nattai in the south to the Hunter in the north. In 1958 he claimed that for many years he had

“... endeavoured to get the public to use the term Blue Plateau for this wide extent of Hawkesbury Sandstone.” (Taylor 1958, p.99).

The fact that some still argued for a relatively expansive Blue Mountains upset the writers of the first *Australian Encyclopaedia*, who stated:

“The name ‘Blue Mountains’ is often used in a vague and erroneous way to denote the whole main range region west of Sydney; thus the Jenolan caves (*q.v.*) are said to lie ‘in the heart of the Blue Mountains,’ though they are at least 25 miles from their nearest edge. The name is properly applied only to the sandstone plateau bounded on the north by the Capertee and Colo rivers, and on the south and west by the Cox; the Kurrajong Ridge, though a part of this plateau, is usually considered a separate area.” (Jose & Carter 1925, p.177).

This was to rile Myles Dunphy, with justification. The broader definition may well have been vague, but not erroneous. It could certainly be claimed that Jenolan Caves lies within the Blue Mountains (Dunphy 1969, p.23).

Other publications took a similar view to the *Encyclopaedia*. For instance, from 1897 “*The Mountaineer*” newspaper published the “*Illustrated Tourists’ Guide to the Blue Mountains and Jenolan Caves*” implying that Jenolan Caves was outside the Blue Mountains (Mountaineer 1897-8).

The second *Australian Encyclopaedia*, which appeared in 1958, was less dogmatic than the first, but nonetheless stuck to the localised definition:

“... an ill-defined region which may be taken to embrace the country bounded by the Cox River on the west and south and the lower Nepean and Hawkesbury on the east, and extending north roughly to the latitude of Lithgow.” (Chisholm 1958, p.37, col.2.).

The Greater Blue Mountains?

Myles Dunphy drew many bushwalking maps, especially of what he called the Southern Blue Mountains — the country generally between Katoomba, Jenolan Caves and Yerranderie. The Lands Department's *Blue Mountains and Burragorang Tourist Map*, which ran to many editions from 1932, was prepared at Dunphy's persuasion and with much of his input. It covers from Lidsdale and Mount Tootie in the north, down to Taralga and Moss Vale in the south, thereby implying that the mountains were more extensive than many would have supposed, though no actual boundaries of the Blue Mountains were supplied (NSW Department of Lands 1932).

Dunphy was well aware of the early history of the name and believed it should be applied in the expansive sense. Accordingly, when in 1932 he and his National Parks and Primitive Areas Council formally proposed a huge national park covering almost to the Hunter Range in the north, and almost to Wombeyan Caves road in the south, he simply called it a “Blue Mountains National Park” (Dunphy 1934). (Figure 6).

However, he was also aware of the contradictory definitions that had taken hold, believing the name had been hijacked by parochial tourism interests. He came to realise that if his vision was to be realised he would need

“... to by-pass the political, local government and mountain tourist interests and so avoid an argument ... as to the limits of the Blue Mountains.” (Dunphy 1969, p.39).

Accordingly, he gradually introduced the word ‘Greater’. In an 1934 item titled *Blue Mountains National Park Scheme*, he stated:

"The Blue Mountains National Park proposal is that all the unalienated, inferior Crown lands of the Greater Blue Mountains region, be set apart and dedicated as the Blue Mountains National Park." (Dunphy 1934,col.6).

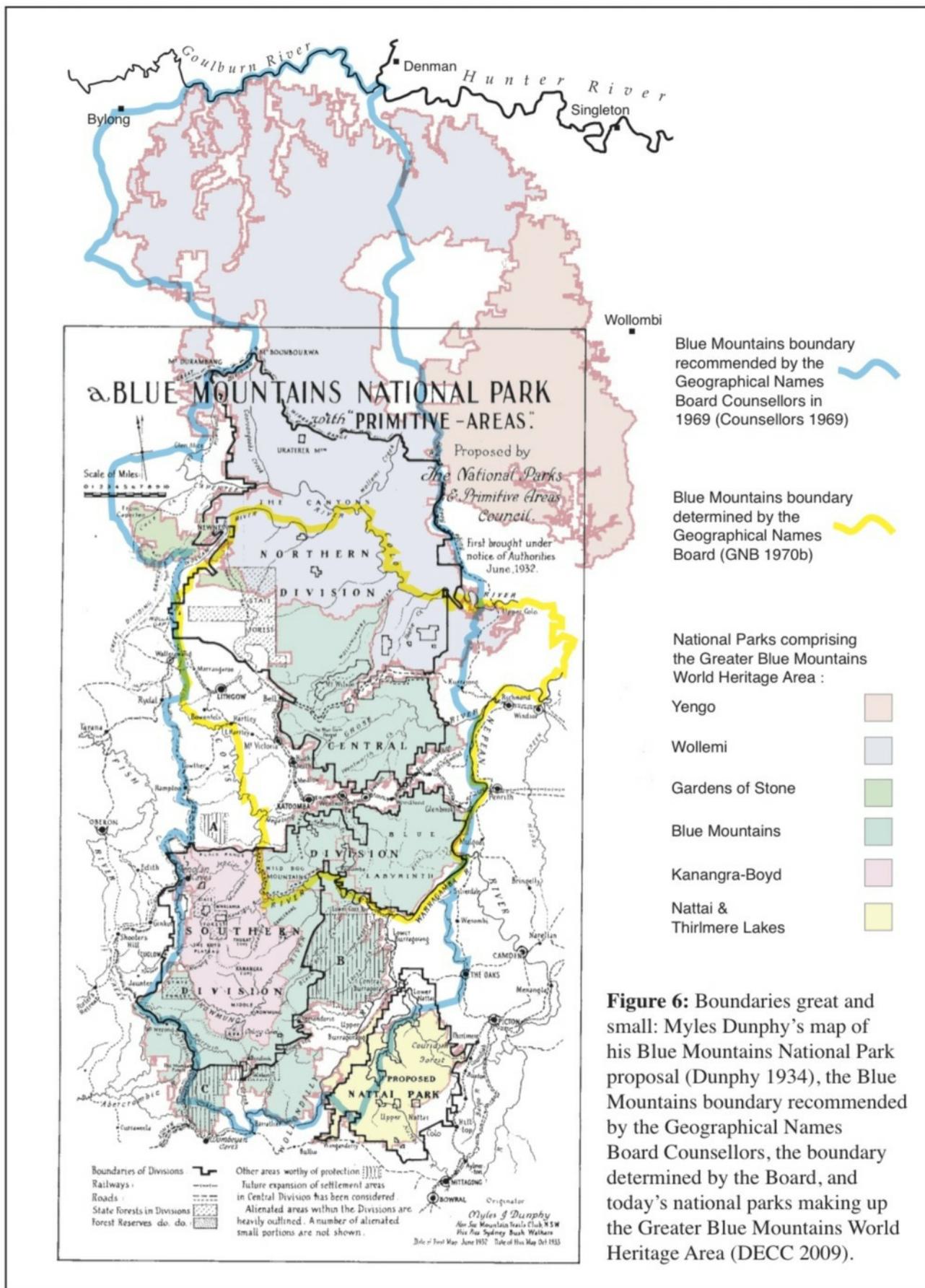


Figure 6: Boundaries great and small: Myles Dunphy’s map of his Blue Mountains National Park proposal (Dunphy 1934), the Blue Mountains boundary recommended by the Geographical Names Board Counsellors, the boundary determined by the Board, and today’s national parks making up the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (DECC 2009).

Three years later, in an article titled *Blue Mountains National Park*, he stated, misleadingly, that the “Greater Blue Mountains National Park” had been proposed in 1932, though at other places in the article the park was named without the word ‘Greater’ (Dunphy 1937, p.49).

It was not until 1959 that the Blue Mountains National Park was created. Initially it was confined mainly to the Grose River catchment, a fact much lamented by Dunphy, though in time areas were added almost as far south as Wombeyan Caves — albeit subjected to a massive intrusion by Kanangra-Boyd National Park. The Park only covered a little of the country north of the Bell Range: when, in the 1970s, there was a campaign to reserve most of the crown land between that range and the Hunter, the result was a huge new park named after Wollemi Creek, a central feature of the area.

In keeping with his original vision, Dunphy would have liked Kanangra-Boyd and Wollemi National Parks, and also Nattai and Gardens of Stone National Parks, to be part of Blue Mountains National Park. That they were not, reflects the reality that new parks earn more credos for politicians than park additions, rather than any meaningful departure from Dunphy’s vision.

In a way Dunphy’s wish came true with bonuses, when in 2000 all the area covered by those parks, as well as Yengo National Park and other areas, became the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. In advancing that name, the proponents, as Dunphy had done, included the word ‘Greater’ to facilitate acceptance in the public eye, making the wishful claim that the area had

“for decades been identified by the public as the Greater Blue Mountains” (NPWS 1998, p.14.; Jones, 2011).

In fact, according to the view of history and geography propounded by Dunphy himself, the word ‘Greater’ was redundant: it was not part of his original proposal and arguably need not have been included in the name of the World Heritage Area.

The Geographical Names Board

In 1968 the fledging NSW Geographical Names Board, under the chairmanship of Surveyor General Noel Fletcher, decided it needed a formal definition of the Blue Mountains. It referred the matter to its Counsellors — an advisory group representing various interests. Dunphy was one of the Counsellors, as were archivist Peter Orlovich, historians Alec Chisholm and Bernard Dowd, and bushwalker Wilf Hilder (CGNB 1969-1970).

The Counsellors recognised the difficulties associated with the different historical, geological and physical viewpoints. In fact, they debated the matter for six of their monthly meetings, a debate that was complicated when two new counsellors, geographers Dennis Jeans and Maurice Daly, were appointed midway. There was majority support for a relatively expansive Blue Mountains, with at least one Counsellor, Jeans, in favour of the whole range from Goulburn in the south to the Hunter Valley in the north. However, the detail was difficult. It is all very well to tie the definition to a portion of the Great Dividing Range, but the reality is that much of the mountain country under consideration—including most of the part now most commonly associated with the Blue Mountains — lies on spurs off that Range. The country of the Nattai is not attached to the Range at all, so there was particular vexation concerning the south-eastern boundary.

At the fifth meeting, in August 1969, the Counsellors resolved to send a map prepared by Dunphy and Jeans — which no one agreed on — with amendments proposed by each individual. This was rescinded at the September meeting, when majority agreement was reached on a description written by Jeans and Hilder. That was provided to the Board, along with a dissenting view by Dunphy and Dowd.

The 400-word majority description involved an area more or less bounded by the Goulburn and Hunter Rivers in the north; the Wombeyan Caves Road in the South; the Great Dividing Range and Bylong Valley in the west; and the Nattai country, the Nepean River, the Putty Road and Martindale Creek in the east (CGNB 1969). Dunphy and Dowd’s version was also extensive but they proposed to limit the

northern boundary at the Hunter Range; moreover, perhaps anticipating that the Board would take a restricted view, Dunphy and Dowd proposed the title Greater Blue Mountains for their area (Dunphy and Dowd 1969). Both proposals involved complex descriptions involving watercourses, roads and ridges.

The Board considered the matter at its meeting of 3 December 1969; only four of the seven members were present. The problem they faced was that the material before them (which included a treatise by Dunphy) was lengthy, complex and confused (Dunphy 1969). In agonising over the detail the Counsellors had been eluded by a simple, broad-brush vision. Unsurprisingly, the Board ignored their views and recommendations and embarked on a discussion based on their own conceptions — as they were entitled to do (GNB 1969). As a result they came up with relatively localised boundaries.

When the Counsellors later asked the reasons for its decision, the Board acknowledged the Counsellors' case for a broader definition but said that it had decided to

“restrict boundaries to coincide to a large extent with the popular concept of the region as at the present time” (Millar 1970).

The Board's minutes provide more insight. For instance, with regard to the northern boundary the Board considered

“few inhabitants of the area north of the Colo and Capertee Rivers would consider themselves in the Blue Mountains” (GNB 1969).

Believing that a sound definition of the mountains should involve river boundaries, they selected the Wolgan and Colo Rivers for the northern boundary and the Coxs River in the south.

As to the western boundary, the Board stated

“History records that Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson made the first known crossing of the Blue Mountains”,

and therefore settled on Coxs River as part of the western boundary in order to ensure that the explorers' terminus, Mount Blaxland, lay beyond the Mountains .

As we have seen, it cannot be claimed that the explorers *completely* crossed the Blue Mountains according to the concept of the Blue Mountains of their time. The 'history' the Board relied on was based on the mythology that grew around the whole crossing narrative. In making its determination the Board gave official credence not only to an unimaginatively localised view, but to an entrenched mythology.

Further, to the extent that they chose an area which is quite separate from the watershed of the Great Dividing Range, they departed completely from the concept that the Blue Mountains constituted a portion of that range. On the other hand, they gave no credence to any geological perspective, for the sandstone country extends far beyond the Board's boundaries, even crossing the Dividing Range in the Cullen Bullen area.

The determination, entered in the Geographical Names Register on 24 April 1970, was that the Blue Mountains was

“A series of dissected plateaus, ranges and escarpments bounded on the N by the Wolgan and Colo Rivers, on the W and S by Coxs River and Lake Burragorang and on the E by the Nepean and Hawkesbury River.” (GNB 1970a).

Confusingly, the next month the Board also defined a “Blue Mountains Range”, described as a

“A range of mountains, plateau and escarpments extending off the Great Dividing Range about 4.8 km N.W. of Wolgan Gap in a generally S.E. direction for about 96 km, terminating at Emu Plains. For about 2/3 of its length it is traversed by the Great Western Highway and the Main Western Railway. Several established towns are situated on its heights, including Katoomba, Blackheath, Mt. Victoria,

and Springwood. It forms the watershed between Coxs River to the S and the Grose and Wolgan Rivers to the N.” (GNB 1970b).

Again, the range so-described does not represent any part of the Great Dividing Range, but constitutes an east-trending branch of that Range.

These definitions remain current. They are quite different from the boundaries of a plethora of other ‘Blue Mountains’ entities — the City Council, the State Electorate and the National Park, to name just three. Because they involve matters of land management, administration and law, precise boundaries are needed for such entities. However, the whole idea of defining an intricate boundary for the purposes of recognising the Blue Mountains in the Geographical Names Register was perhaps misguided. As we have seen, the ‘colonial’ Blue Mountains was extensive but indefinite. An appropriate modern definition might well retain those characteristics, and also acknowledge that it has evolved through history.

The highest mountain?

It’s a simple question: what is the highest mountain in the Blue Mountains? Unfortunately the answer is almost as vexed as the name Blue Mountains, though certain geographers of the nineteenth century were in little doubt about it. Robert Whitworth, author of *Bailliere’s NSW Gazetteer* of 1866, proclaimed

“Beemarang, Mount (*Co. Cook*) is the loftiest peak of the Blue mountain range. It is 4100 feet [c.1250m] in height. Sandstone.” (Whitworth 1866, p.34).

The assertion appears in other publications at least as late as 1892, though without mentioning the elevation, the county or the sandstone (Levey 1892 p.33). However, no mention of **Mount Beemarang** can be found on any early parish or county map, or other official record.

Before addressing the identity of Mount Beemarang, it is interesting to examine the highest points* according to today’s nomenclature and data (LPI 2011). [Most of the summits named in this section are shown on [Figure 1](#)].

If we take the nineteenth century idea of an expansive Blue Mountains, extending from Goulburn to the Hunter, then the highest point is **Mount Bindo**, located on the western side of the Great Dividing Range in State Forest near Hampton, in the County of Westmoreland. Its surface elevation is 1,362.4m (4,470 feet). It features not Sydney Basin Triassic sandstone but Lachlan Fold Belt metamorphic rocks. Only a few metres lower than Bindo is **Shooters Hill** (1353.9m). Located 21 km south of Oberon, also in State Forest, and also in Westmoreland, it is built from fold belt metamorphics, and is the highest point in an expansive Blue Mountains that is situated on the watershed of the Great Dividing Range (Raymond, Pogson, et al. 1998).

If we consider only the Blue Mountains as defined by the Geographical Names Board, the highest *named* feature is **Mount Walker**, about four km west of Lithgow. Its elevation is 1186.8m. It is in the County of Cook and the Lithgow Local Government Area and, like Mount Bindo and Shooters Hill, it features fold belt metamorphics, not sandstone.

However, Mount Walker is not the highest point. Research for this paper using a Differential GPS has located a hill with elevation approximately 1189.4m, some 2.6m higher than Walker. Built on Sydney Basin Triassic sandstone, it is located at grid reference GDA 56H 239496 6297634, 6.8 km NNE of Lithgow Railway Station, on the Newnes Plateau. As well as being situated in the Geographical Names Board’s Blue Mountains, the hill happens to lie on the Board’s Blue Mountains Range. The author has dubbed the hill “**Mount Ben**” after the young lad who accompanied the survey team.

Several other mountains come into the picture when we choose other defined areas. For instance, the highest in the Blue Mountains National Park is **Mount Werong** (1215m), on the western side of the

* Note that all mountain elevations provided have been reduced to approximate ground-level.

Great Dividing Range. The highest in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is **Mount Emperor** on the Boyd Plateau (about 1334m). The highest in the Blue Mountains Local Government Area is usually thought to be **One Tree Hill** (1111m), though **Mount Kitosh** on Shipley Plateau may be a few metres higher.

Let's return to Mount Beemarang. *Bailliere's Gazetteer* mentioned in a separate entry that Mount Beemarang (*sic*) was located "at the head of Campbell's River, a little to the north of the 34th parallel". It also admitted that it was only "probably" the highest mountain (Whitworth 1866, p.54).

The *Gazetteer's* map does not show it anywhere, but maps published in 1870 and 1880 by John Bartholomew indeed show "Beemarang 4100" near the head of Campbells River and just north of the 34th.

It seems to be located just west of the position where Shooters Hill would be depicted on the Great Dividing Range, if it were depicted. The 1880 map also indicates that Mount Beemarang lies on or near a track which followed the Great Dividing Range from the south before cutting down into the head of Campbells River (Bartholomew 1870, 1880). (Figure 7).

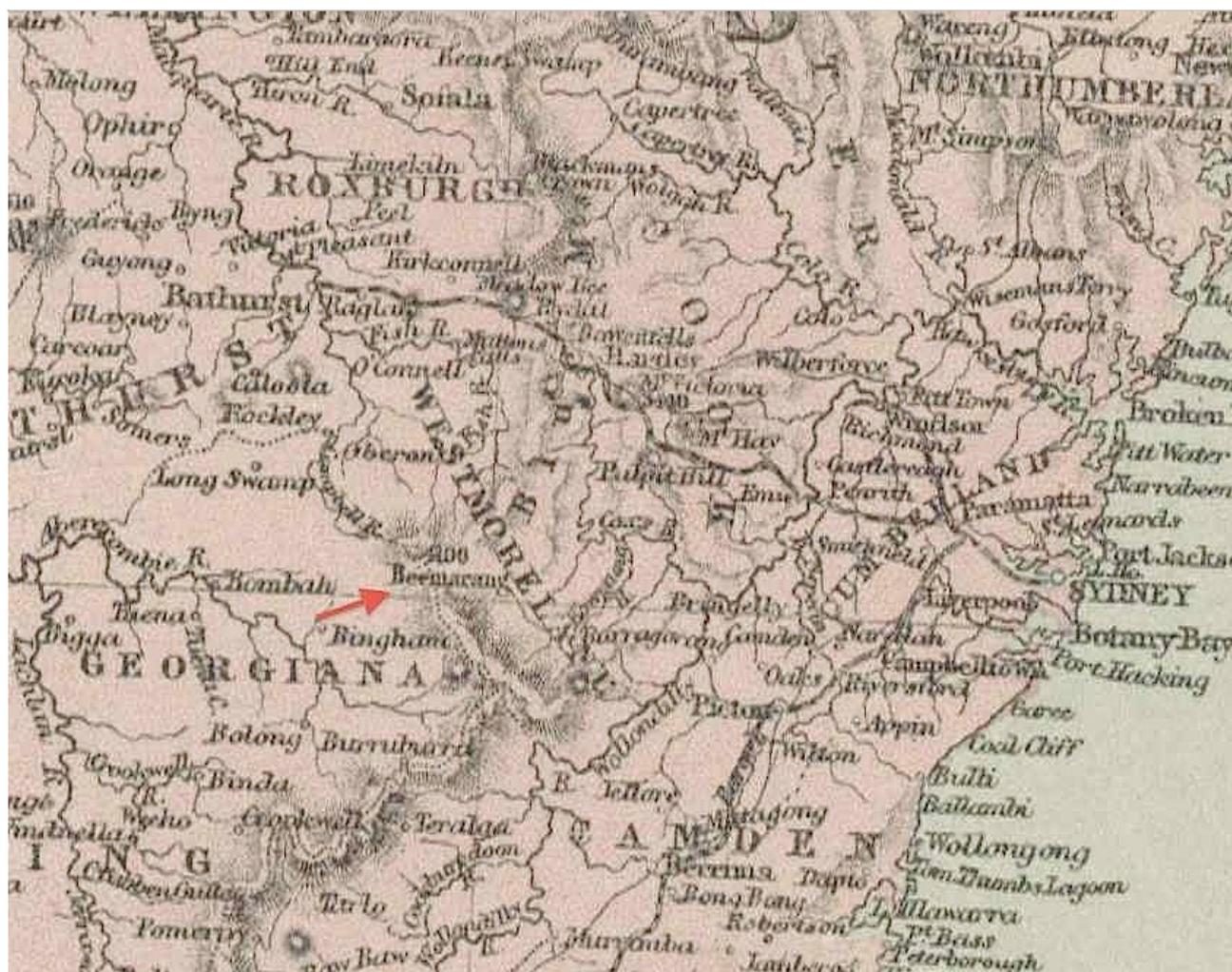


Figure 7. Portion of John Bartholomew's 1880 map showing "Beemarang 4100" at the head of Campbells River (Bartholomew, 1880).

Certainly the name "Beemarang" is well-connected to the head of Campbells River. On 7 May 1819, while on his expedition to Bathurst via Taralga, Charles Throsby stopped at Campbells River at a place he recorded as "Burnmaring", apparently an Aboriginal name (Brownscombe 2004, p.308). This was at or near the spot where in 1834 Assistant Surveyor James Larmer surveyed the location of a hut and named it on his plan as "Beemarang or Swatchfield". He repeated the names in his field book, noting that the place was owned by "Davis" (Larmer 1834a,b).

Larmer's "Beemarang", which is most likely another interpretation of Throsby's "Burnmaring", is clearly the origin of the name of the Parish of Beemarang, which is centred there. The 1885 map of the parish names the property Swatchfield and indicates that it was held by William Davis (NSW Department of Lands 1885). Larmer connected his surveys with prior work by Assistant Surveyor William Govett, who traced the Great Dividing Range in the area in 1832. Neither Larmer nor Govett named any high points in the area (Govett 1832).

It is possible that Mount Beemarang is actually Shooters Hill, which has a surface elevation of 1354m. However, Shooters Hill was shown, and named as such, on an 1872 map of the County of Westmoreland (Basch 1872, map 7). Further, it is not strictly at the head of Campbells River, and it cannot be seen from



Figure 8. The probable Mount Beemarang, as seen from the tower on Shooters Hill.

the river valley due to several hills which *are* at its head. The most prominent of these, when viewed from Swatchfield (Figure 8), is in the Vulcan State Forest 4.8 km west of Shooters Hill, at grid reference GDA 55H 758708 6245362. It is unnamed, but it has an elevation of approximately 1336m — 18m lower than Shooters Hill (LPMA 2010).

William Davis and his fellow settlers could well have formed the idea that this was the highest mountain, and promoted it accordingly. While they undoubtedly would have climbed it, even if the forest of the day did not obscure the view from the summit it would have been impossible without a suitable instrument to determine that Shooters Hill was higher. As to the claimed height of 4,100 feet (1,250m), in those days most surveyors were using compass and chain, not levels and theodolites. The figure was either a guess, or was obtained erroneously.

In summary, Mount Beemarang may have been an alternative name for Shooters Hill or, more likely, it was the local name of the now-unnamed hill 4.8 km to the west of it. We must ignore the claims that Mount Beemarang was in the County of Cook, that it was 4,100 feet high and that it was made of sandstone.

Whatever the truth, the ghost of Beemarang is intent on haunting us. An Internet search readily turns up a number of websites claiming that Mount Beemarang or Beemerang is the highest in the Blue Mountains, and has an elevation of 1,247m. In a classic example of the pitfalls of Internet research, this information seems to have been absurdly derived from digitised versions of *Bailliere's Gazetteer* or other obscure nineteenth century publications, to the extent of a precise metric conversion of the original "4100 feet" — an elevation that applies to no candidate for Mount Beemarang, nor any other relevant "highest mountain in the Blue Mountains".

One website (Osaka University 2011) goes further, claiming "Mount Beemerang" is "now called Birds Rock, about 15 km north of Lithgow", and attributing the claim to *Hutchinson's Australasian Encyclopaedia* (Levey 1892, p.33). However, that Encyclopaedia does not mention Birds Rock, which is in the Newnes Plateau area and was named after R.E.B. "Bert" Bird (1891-1961) in the 1940s — and incidentally was the probable terminus of an 1823 expedition by Robert Hoddle (Macqueen 2001). It appears that someone in more recent years was under the impression that Birds Rock was the true highest point of the Blue Mountains and therefore assumed it was Mount Beemarang. They were wrong on both counts. At about 1180m, Birds Rock Trig is lower than several other points in the "official" Blue Mountains, and it was never called Mount Beemarang.

Conclusion

The name Blue Mountains has meant, and continues to mean, many things to many people. Initially it involved an extensive but indefinite barrier, but as time progressed its connotations have been influenced variously by the Blue Mountains crossing narrative and the outlooks of road and rail builders, settlers, tourists, tourism operators, geographers, geologists, recreationists, conservationists and countless administrators of various ilk.

In the mind of the individual, the concept of the Blue Mountains will depend very much on which of those narratives and themes is dominant in his or her world view. For instance, the region perceived to be covered by the Blue Mountains Association of Cultural Heritage Organisations would differ greatly depending on whether one's interest lay in the archaeology of Coxs Road, built heritage more generally, Aboriginal cultural sites, or exploration history — or whether one lived in Katoomba or Putty.

The Geographical Names Board was brave and perhaps misguided when it decided to define a precise boundary of the Blue Mountains, and would have been well advised to devise a definition reflecting the indefinite and evolving character. The definition it actually chose, while consistent with many people's notions today, is very limited compared with historical notions. Moreover, it unfortunately validates the evolved narrative that Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson completely crossed the Blue Mountains.

Many parts of the Great Dividing Range and its branches between Goulburn and the Hunter, that once would have carried the label Blue Mountains, have been left nameless. While the gaps are sometimes filled in part by referring to the 'Southern' or 'Northern' Blue Mountains, such names are unsatisfactory as it is not clear whether they are actually part of the Blue Mountains, or are located north or south of the actual Blue Mountains. There is similar ambiguity in the name Greater Blue Mountains: are the 'Greater' parts really in the Blue Mountains or not? Furthermore, some areas that have in the past been associated with the Blue Mountains remain beyond even those labels. For instance, Mount McAlister, an eminence near Taralga of similar altitude to Katoomba, has now to be content simply with being located on the Great Dividing Range.

An exception to the rule is Blue Mountains National Park, which extends almost to Wombeyan Caves, far to the south of the Names Board's boundary.

All these anomalies might be rectified if the name Blue Mountains was discarded and a new set of names, perhaps based on Aboriginal nomenclature, were adopted. Indeed, there has been a recent attempt to attach Aboriginal names to various 'sectors' of the World Heritage Area. It involves, for instance, the application of the name 'Kedumba' to the area most people would regard as the Blue Mountains. The suggested nomenclature has yet gained no currency: the existing names are so entrenched that such a move is not likely to succeed.

While the change in application of the name may seem regrettable, that change is simply a reflection of over 220 years of history. The important thing is to understand that history when talking of events at any given time. The Blue Mountains that one might cross today are a different Blue Mountains to those almost crossed in 1813 and almost crossed by Barrallier in 1802 and by Caley in 1804, and, arguably, those actually crossed by John Wilson in 1798.

Of course, whatever definition we might choose for the Blue Mountains, we can be sure that Aboriginal people have been crossing them for thousands of years.

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Abbreviations

CGNB Counsellors of the Geographical Names Board

GNB NSW Geographical Names Board

LPI NSW Land and Property Information (2 June 2011-)

LPMA NSW Land & Property Management Authority (1 July 2009 - 4 April 2011)

NPWS NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service

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