

AN EARLY MEANING OF 'OUT BACK'

EVIDENCE FROM THE RIVERINA REGION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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'Outback' is a widely-used Australian word describing and denoting remote and sparsely-populated parts of inland Australia (often used in a generic and romanticised sense). In early citations the word 'outback' is rendered as the phrase 'out back'. The *Australian National Dictionary* gives definitions for 'outback' adverb, adjective, and noun; the attributed meanings essentially correspond to the modern sense of the word, pertaining to 'sparsely inhabited country which is remote from a major centre of population' or 'characteristic of remote parts of the country'.

The purpose of this article is to articulate an older meaning of the phrase 'out back' (from which the word 'outback' derived). It is proposed that during the mid- to late-nineteenth century 'out back' referred specifically to land away or distant from the frontages of permanent watercourses. Its usage, as exemplified in this article, can be associated with the historical pattern of European settlement on the saltbush plains of New South Wales. The case for an earlier meaning of the phrase 'out back' relies on the evidence of a batch of quotations, most of which antedate the citations published in the *Australian National Dictionary*. The quotations are extracted from passages relating to the western Riverina region of New South Wales, obtained from newspapers, journals, and government publications (the product of historical research undertaken by the Hay Historical Society).

The earliest of the passages is from the *New South Wales Government Gazette* of 27 September 1848 (No. 109). The following description of the 'Geramy' pastoral run, estimated to have an area of 22,400 acres, was written by the prospective lessees, James and William Tyson. The description is from a list of 'Claims to Leases of Crown Land Beyond the Settled Districts' for the Lachlan squatting district:

The land occupied by us is barren in the extreme, out a short distance from the river neither is there any water out back. The water at the hut is called Geramy or Wanthirm by the Blacks. We have the Commissioner's authority to claim 7 miles frontage to the Lachlan River; and we are bounded on the east or upper side by a line running nearly north and south, coming on the river at the established old hut or waterhole, boundary about 3 miles east of our hut; we are bounded on the lower or west by a line running nearly north and south, which divides us from the land occupied by a Mr. Tooth, and comes in on the river at a plain 4 miles below our hut, at the lower end of the marsh of the Lachlan; north by the river; and south by the plains.

The first sentence, where the phrase 'out back' appears, probably suffers from a misplaced comma. It could perhaps be paraphrased as: 'Apart from the river frontage the land we occupy is extremely barren and waterless.' In any case 'out back' in this sentence evidently refers to the dry plains beyond the river frontage. The Tyson brothers use the phrase to describe a specific part of their run. In 1848 there is no doubt that the *whole* of the 'Geramy' run could have been described as 'sparsely inhabited country remote from a major centre of population'. The township of Oxley was established much later (in the mid-1860s) on the north bank of the Lachlan River, opposite the north-east corner of 'Geramy' run.

Pastoral runs began to be taken up in the Riverina region of New South Wales during the late 1830s and 1840s. Stockholders began edging along the Lachlan, Murrumbidgee, Billabong, and Murray systems, where they occupied the valuable river frontages. The pastoral runs selected by the squatters were typically of an elongated shape, extending back from the river into the dry back-blocks where stock could be grazed during wet winters. The vegetation on the land beyond the river corridors was dominated by saltbush species that could provide fodder for stock, even during drought years. The limiting factor for the exploitation of this resource was the availability of water.

By the time of the gold discoveries of the early 1850s the whole of the Riverina river-frontages had been taken up and their occupation consolidated. The expanding population on the Victorian diggings provided a growing market for stock to be slaughtered. The Riverina was the prime fattening country closest to the market and became a sort of holding centre, from where the Victorian market could be supplied as required. Until the early 1860s cattle were the predominant stock grazed on the undeveloped Riverina stations. Cattle could feed further from water and so utilised more land; they were allowed to wander freely over the runs until it was time for the yearly or half-yearly muster.

With rising wool prices during the late 1850s the squatters on the Riverina pastoral holdings began to shift from cattle to sheep. This process required increased capital investment and more intensive management techniques. Wire-fencing began to replace post-and-rail in the early 1860s, which facilitated the extensive subdivision of pastoral runs into paddocks. There was a parallel increase in the development of watering facilities, such as wells and constructed water-storages, to allow for the enclosure of stock within large paddocks. These changes caused a phasing out of the shepherd on the inland stations, to be replaced by the boundary rider. With the sheep thus enclosed, a man on a horse was a cheaper alternative to the shepherd, able to effectively manage larger flocks than his predecessor. These developments led to the formation of new stations away from permanent watercourses (known as 'back stations'), and also enabled

squatters on river-fronted stations to graze stock at the back of their runs on a long-term basis.

The passage below is extracted from a report on the results of heavy rainfall in the districts surrounding Hay; it was written by the Hay correspondent to the *Pastoral Times* newspaper (printed in Deniliquin) and published on 22 December 1866. It begins:

With respect to the great fall of rain which we had last Sunday week, we have received accounts confirming the truth of our statements of last week. At Groongal on the frontage two inches fell, but out back four and a-half inches were registered.

'Groongal', located between Narrandera and Hay, had been taken up by 1839 and was one of the earliest of the lower Murrumbidgee runs. In 1866 the lease was held by the Learmonth brothers. This passage plainly differentiates between the rainfall that had occurred on the river frontage at 'Groongal' and that which had fallen 'out back'.

The 'Boolegal' run on the lower Lachlan River, opposite the present township of Booligal, was taken up by the Tom brothers in the mid to late 1840s. In the 1860s this extensive run was subdivided, with stations such as 'Alma', 'Tom's Lake', and 'Culpataro' being formed from the low-lying country at the back of the run. The following report was written by the 'Lachlan' correspondent to the *Pastoral Times*, published on 13 February 1869. The correspondent was writing from Booligal township:

On Thursday, the 29th ult., we were visited by the hurricane which passed over Victoria with such disastrous results. Such a dust storm has never been known on this river. At Alma, sixteen miles out back, a heavy fall of enormous hailstones was experienced during the thunderstorms which succeeded. I have not heard of any harm being done, or life lost.

Here again a distinction is made between events at different geographical locations, specifically between the dust-storm experienced on the river at Booligal and the hail-storm sixteen miles 'out back' at 'Alma' station.

The following sentence is from a report written by the 'Hay' correspondent to the *Town and Country Journal*, published on 9 March 1878. Here the phrase 'out back' describes the pastoral land distant from the river where wells were the only secure facilities for the provision of water:

It is gratifying to report that this district has been favoured with a good downpour of rain, but still in some parts not in sufficient quantity to be of any value—as out back on some stations the wells are again at work to water stock.

In its nineteenth century usage 'out back' has an obvious affinity with the word 'back' as used in the phrase 'at the back of', which, in its earliest meaning, the *Australian National Dictionary* defines as 'the part of a station most distant from the homestead or from permanent water'. This meaning can be demonstrated in the following quotation, published in the *Pastoral Times* on 12 October 1867 (re-printed from the Echuca *Riverine Herald*):

... we are informed that Mr. Currie, of Karimba station, has been driven from his homestead by the flood, and has had to retreat with the whole of his establishment to some sandhills at the back of his station.

Another related phrase is 'back block(s)', indicating 'land behind that with a water frontage; land on which there is no permanent watercourse'. The following passage was published in the *Pastoral Times* on 26 May 1859, on the subject of efforts by residents of Lang's Crossing-place (later to become the township of Hay) to sink a well on the Old Man Plain, the stretch of country between the Murrumbidgee River and the Billabong Creek:

Some at Lang's Crossing-Place, on the Murrumbidgee, have subscribed upwards of one hundred pounds towards sinking a well on the centre of the much-dreaded Old Man Plain. The distance across this extensive plain is about fifty miles, and several months in the year there is not a drop of water to be had. Many lives have been lost travelling over these plains, from time to time, and those who are combining to carry out the project of supplying these arid wastes are to be commended. People are beginning to appreciate these 'back blocks,' as they are termed, if they succeed, as no doubt they will, in obtaining water by sinking, a very large amount of stock can be depastured on lands now useless solitudes.

The usage of 'back' in its various forms—'back blocks', 'back run', 'back station', 'at the back of' and 'out back'—to describe or denote land that is apart from the river-*frontage* seems logical and self-evident in a linguistic sense. In addition there is little doubt that the psychological focus of squatters who leased river-fronted runs was strongly directed towards the river. The length of frontage was an important factor in the value of the pastoral lease and the permanent stream was the prime source of water for the station, for both stock and humans. The river-bank and its environs was almost invariably selected as the most comfortable and practical location for the homestead and many of the subsidiary station-buildings. The river was often associated with commercial and personal contact with the outside world: roads and tracks often ran parallel to the river and, when water-levels were high, steamers were the preferred means of delivering supplies and transporting wool to market (for example, on the Murrumbidgee from the late 1850s onwards). A similar psychological focus could be attributed to the residents of townships located along the river corridors of inland Australia.

The following quotations provide further illustrations of the usage of 'out back' in describing land away from the river frontages. Bathurst burr (*Xanthium spinosum*) was accidentally

introduced into Australia in the early nineteenth century from South America. The pervasive weed gradually spread along the stock-routes and river corridors of inland Australia. The report below, regarding Bathurst burr, was written by the 'Hay' correspondent to the *Pastoral Times* newspaper and published on 10 March 1866:

Too much attention cannot be drawn to this growing pest. It is as yet confined to the roads and rivers, but the crop is most extraordinarily prolific this season. It may appear to some paltry, and that it never can overspread the country. The frontages are literally stocked, and it will take but a few years to find its way out back.

The next passage, describing the Murrumbidgee River flooding its banks during October 1867, was written by the Hay correspondent to the *Pastoral Times* (published on 26 October 1867):

The river has been higher here than since the township was formed. There is still a great swamp in front of Murphy's Restaurant, which indeed is surrounded. The water is gone out back through the Mark Tree Scrub, and is said to be swimmable in places. No one here remembers such a volume of water, and its extending so far out on the plains.

The earliest citation for 'outback' in the *Australian National Dictionary* is from the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* (17 April 1869):

Grass will be abundant out back, and those pleasant and welcome visitors the travelling sheep will have comfortable quarters all the way down the river.

This quotation is used to illustrate the meaning 'Out in or to country which is remote from a major centre of population'. However, the alternate meaning explored in this article—of land beyond the river frontage—cannot be precluded and could also be applied to the phrase 'out back' within this passage. This applies also to other early citations for 'outback' in the *Australian National Dictionary*.

The following two passages provide examples of the usage of the phrase 'out back' in the twentieth century, in both cases conforming to the earlier meaning of land beyond or distant from the river frontages. In each instance the writers have recorded personal recollections of their early lives spent at Hay and surrounding districts during the 1870s.

In April 1872 the Wesleyan minister, Rev. William Weston, arrived at Hay to take charge of the newly-created circuit there. Rev. Weston was aged thirty-one and had previously ministered in Victoria. He remained at Hay until March 1875. He subsequently served at various circuits throughout New South Wales and retired from active ministry in 1906. The Hay Methodist Church

celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1922; at the age of eighty-one years Rev. Weston travelled to Hay to take part in the celebrations. As part of his contribution to the occasion Rev. Weston wrote an article, 'Early Methodism in Hay', which was published on 25 July 1922 in the local newspaper, the *Riverine Grazier*. The extract below concerns the minister's regular visits on horseback to stations and townships in the district during his tenure at Hay:

The distance round was 300 miles, but during the shearing season it was extended to twice that distance, the whole time being spent in country work, there being such numbers of men at all the woolsheds glad of a service. Thus the circle was extended sometimes as far as Balranald, at other times beyond Booligal to Tom's Lake and the stations adjacent; then in the trip up the Murrumbidgee River, turning to the north and going to Gunbar and the region around. Most of the large holdings on the river had extra woolsheds some distance out back; these would be visited and services held.

In the winter of 1876 the seventeen year-old Thomas Booth and two companions, seeking work, made their way on foot from central Victoria to 'Corrong' station on the lower Lachlan River. Booth and his friends were engaged as rouseabouts during the shearing at 'Corrong' woolshed. After 'cut-out' Booth continued working at 'Corrong' as a station-hand. In November 1876 the squatter Peter Tyson made Tom Booth a proposition:

After Tyson had handed me my cheque he said 'I want you to go out back whim-driving at Sebastopol Well'. Immediately my head was filled with thoughts of the Whim Holes near Ballarat where I got two shillings a week and found, but I decided to go. After a couple of days rest I was ready for the journey and I set off into the wilderness, leaving behind what little civilisation there was at Corrong homestead.

Booth remained at 'Corrong' until June 1877 when he re-located to Hay. In February 1878 he returned home to Victoria. He later married and raised a family. Booth was a farmer for most of his life; he ended up in the Werribee district where he died in 1943, aged about 84 years. Before he died Tom Booth wrote an account of his life, from which the above extract comes. He recorded his story in an exercise book that extended to 146 pages and the book was discovered by family members following the death of one of Booth's grand-daughters in 1996.

In *Australian English* William Ramson discusses the Australian use of particularisers such as 'back', 'head' and 'out':

Out- had a more general application in British English, and words like *outsettler* and *outsettlement* are recorded from the eighteenth century. Both of these were in use in Australia shortly after 1800, and words like *out-squatter*, which had a fairly short life, and *out-station* were presumably modelled on them. The use of *back-*, as in *back-blocks*, *back station*, and, further out still, *outback*, seems to replace *out-*, in its more general application, in the latter part of the century.

Ramson seems to suggest here that the combination of two particularisers in the case of 'out back' has a sort of magnifying effect, leading to a meaning with associations of 'remote parts of the country'. This may apply to the meaning of 'outback' as it was used in the late nineteenth century during the period of romanticisation of Australian English epitomised by the writers at the *Bulletin*. However, to residents of the stations and townships of Riverina in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the phrase 'out back' was probably just an elliptical construction, shortening phrases such as 'out to the *back* of the run' or 'out in the *back* blocks'.

References

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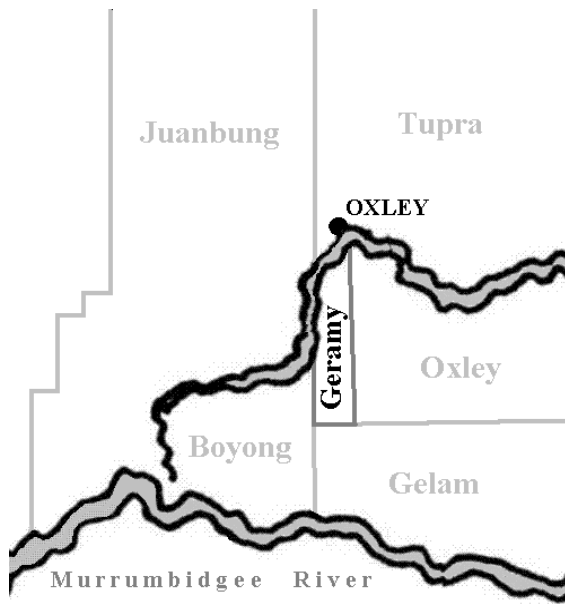
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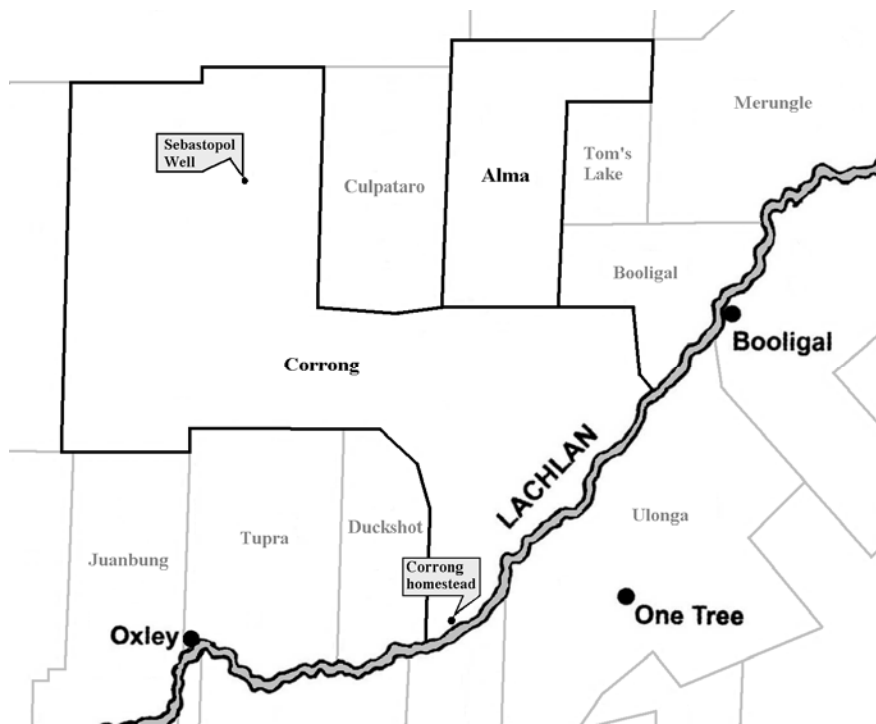
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ILLUSTRATIONS

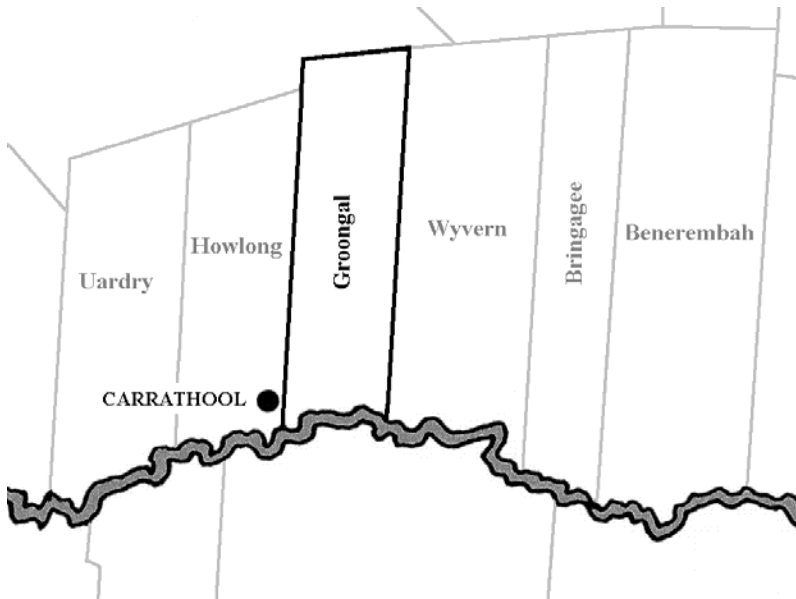
The following illustrations are adapted from station maps published in *Mackenzie's Riverina*, showing stations boundaries in 1910.



This image shows the location of 'Geramy' station, near the junction of the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers.



This image shows the location of 'Alma' and 'Corrong' stations, near Booligal; also the locations of Corrong homestead and the Sebastopol Well on 'Corrong' station.



This image shows the location of 'Groongal' station, on the Murrumbidgee River between Narrandera and Hay.