

The Omeo Road

Members of the audience are placed so that they feel they are inside a bus, looking towards the front. John (the driver) and Amy (tour guide) are talking as they climb aboard.

Amy I'm tired.
John We get a break at the end of this trip.
Amy Sometimes I don't know if I'm coming or going ...
John A few drinks when we finish, a good night's sleep ... you'll be fine.
Amy I certainly hope so.
John (to his passengers, including the audience and some of the singing characters) All aboard, ladies and gentlemen. Ready to go. Bringing you all the sights, the places and the history ...
J & A ... of the Omeo road!
Cherry (in the bus/audience) That's not the same as the Great Ocean Road?
John No, no. This is the Great Alpine Highway ...
Chris (also in the audience) The Omeo Road?
Amy Both names are correct. Has everyone got their guide books?
Tourists Yes. Open. Ready.
John Off we go, ladies and gentlemen. Take it away, Amy!

The bus sets off with a roar. John looks around, because he doesn't hear Amy giving her travelogue. In fact, she's looking blank, so he starts.

John That's the famous log jail I was telling you about, there on your right. And that's the Golden Age Hotel, destroyed in the thirty-nine fires, and rebuilt as good as ever. Finest hotel in country Victoria. We sometimes stay there with our tour parties, they've got a good table ...
Amy (to John's surprise) The first explorers came down from the north. We're heading back the opposite way, to discover where they came from.
John coughs, by way of signalling to Amy.
John That road there takes you out to Benambra. Small settlement, round about eighteen thirty seven. About as early as it gets, in this part of the world. (Charlie coughs, by way of signalling to John) For white fel-las, anyway.
Charlie (on the bus, but sitting in the audience) Johnny come lately. Huh.
Amy (pointing right) Princes Highway to Lakes Entrance, head off there. Now, a big climb to the Sandhill, you can turn off for Granite Rock; we go straight ahead. There's a divide between two rivers. Behind you,

water runs down to the Mitchell; ahead of you, it flows into the Nicholson. Both names are in your book.

Charlie Your names got no meaning.

Amy Oh yes they have. You listen and you'll find out.

John Ah, Amy ...

Amy John?

John (quietly) Why don't you have a lie down on the back seat. You're getting the passengers confused. They don't know which way we're going.

Amy Oh who cares! (but she does what he suggests, and lies there until late in the performance, making unexpected comments when she stirs.)

Charlie Tell'em 'bout this track, mister.

John The early settlers found the mountains pretty hard going. Naturally, they relied on black men to be their guides.

Charlie Black fellas took'em along the tracks they knew. Best way to get through.

Chris Pretty good road now, though?

Charlie Can't make good road unless you're in the right place. Somebody have to tell'em.

John And they had sense enough to listen. But not always. Sometimes, the tracks followed the mines ...

Amy Rose of Australia!

John What did you say, Amy?

Charlie (after a while) She's dreamin. Lost in long ago.

Amy White Sands ... the Duke of Cornwall mine ...

John The best mines were out to the right of us, a place called Cassilis, not much going on there now ...

Amy Porridge Flat ...

John Bullock waggons used to cut through the surface of the soil and turn it all to mud.

Amy The Jirn Kee ...

Charlie (laughing) Nobody know what that mean. Ever!

John (to his passengers) It was the name of a water race, that brought water from the mountains one side of the divide and took it to the other.

Chris Why?

John For a mine. They used to wash the gold out of the gravel they dug up ...

Charlie (laughing) Jirn Kee! Whitefella think him clever, don't know his own words.

John Giving us a challenge, are you Charlie? Okay, you're on! You ought to know this one. Black Camp Creek! (A sign appears through the window of the bus.)

Tourists (sitting among the audience, who should imagine themselves as being in the bus) Black Camp Creek!

Charlie Reckon you might hear voices if you camp there for the night.

Cherry Have you camped there Charlie?

Charlie Mmmhh! I'd be scared.

Cherry What're you scared of, Charlie?

Charlie Not my people. Jaithmatang. They belong up here, they sneak down to where we camp, kill our people, fight. We call'em Brajerak, men we fear.

Chris What part of the country d'you come from, Charlie?

Charlie Down where the lady was talkin about. You haven't been there yet.

Amy (on the back seat) All I can see is the roof of a bus, but I've got the road in my mind.

Charlie These people wanta know the country.

John And they will! Tongio Gap! (Another sign appears in front of the bus.) Charlie?

Charlie You tell'em. You're getting paid.

Chris It's not in the book.

John Oh yes it is.

Chris What's it mean then?

John This is the dividing range. We're passing through the gap!

Chris Tongio?

John I just forget. I've got my hands full at the wheel.

Chris Charlie?

Charlie Not my people. Other fella name this one.

Cherry It's a long run down ...

John It flattens out at the swamp.

Amy Aaaaaahhh!

Cherry You all right, love?

Amy It's where they killed the gold buyer, Green. Eighteen fifty-nine. Armstrong and Chamberlain were their

names. Poison to be with. On their way to Melbourne they spent the night at Lock-up Creek ...

The tourists look to the front for a sign.

John Not there yet. I'll show it to you when it comes. They were hanged weren't they Amy?

Amy Bloody good riddance!

John Got strong views, has Amy. Okay everyone, we're coming in to Swifts Creek. Swift was a prospector, there's not much we know about him. It's a town that's had rises and falls ...

Archie Mostly falls.

John Times can be hard in the bush. Ezards had big mills, as we'll see along here. An amazing amount of timber's gone out of here. Trouble is, once it's gone, it's gone.

Archie The bush never makes any money.

Ella It's only where the work gets done.

Archie The value's added in another place. Only the battlers stay here ...

Ella ... while they can ...

John ... and that's never long ...

Amy It's a great place to be poor.

Tourists (saddened) Oooooooooohhh ...

John But there's always someone starting something new.

Tourists Gold!

John There's still people prospecting today.

Amy They tell us stories and we pass'em on to you.

John We're not as hard up as that ...
Chris Anyone ever made any money through here?
John Not big money, but ... you know ...

A sign 'Ramrod Creek' appears at the front windows of the bus.

Cherry Ramrod? What's that mean?
John There's another with the same name, further on. This used to be one of the boggiest stretches. Bullocks could hardly pull through, the mud was so deep.
Tourists Boggy Creek!
John Not just yet. Up and down, now, to Ensay.

The sign 'Ensay' appears at the front window.

Amy They ought to call the pub George Washington's axe.
Chris Why's that?
Amy You're getting into history here.
Chris Tell us more.

Amy's silent, so John takes over.

John There was a shanty here in the eighteen forties, then a pub. It got burned down, not doing too well, that's when they have an accident, these bush pubs ...
Cherry (reading her guide book) Three or four pubs since then ...
John Nobody's very sure ...
Archie Nobody's ever sure!
Ella That's the beauty of it.
Archie If you can stand the doubt!

A sign appears, Little River Inn.

Ella (laughing) Little River! It's called little because it's little. (still laughing) It hasn't got much to say, has it!
Archie None of these places do. It's all one long struggle-town, the whole road ...
Amy (shrieking) ... from south to north!
John From north to south. Remember where we're going.
Chris Where are we going, John?
John On a long trip to see what can be seen!
Cherry Is there a prize?
John No, but there's an end. That's when we all escape.
Amy Ensay's an island, in the stormy seas off Scotland. Where so many of the first men came from. Macmillan, Arbuckle, McAlister, all the early names ...
Chris (looking around) Why did they give this the name of an island?
John (getting annoyed) Why did anybody name anything?
Cherry Well, yes, why?
John Are you asking me?
Cherry I'm wondering ...
John People have to name things, don't they? What are you going to call something if it doesn't have a name?
Archie You think that's why we have names?

Charlie Whitefella name things to get power. Blackfella names tell you how they felt when they were there. What they doin there.

Ella You think that's better?

Charlie Make up your own mind about that.

A new sign, The Devil's Backbone, appears at the front of the bus.

Tourists (almost chanting) The Devil's Backbone!

John A difficult stretch. Most of the bullockies went straight up the middle of the river. Easier that way.

The tourists look down into the valley of the river.

Tourists Hard days, hard lives ...

Amy ... impossible men. Liars one and all. When they weren't telling lies they were making up yarns ...

John (as another sign appears) Wattle Circle. No lies about that, there they are in flower. Wattles are forever in the bush. And there's a track in there ...

Another sign appears: Angora Range Road.

Amy Goats! See what I mean? Nanny goats and billy goats, bloody goats all the way up that range ...

John Steady on, Amy! They're not hurting you.

Cherry Oh my god, what's this?

John I'll stop and you can have a look.

He stops the bus where we can see a stump carved to resemble a man. The stump man is painted black and white.

Chris What's the catch? I'm not getting out.

John Nobody has to get out. It's a chance to have a look.

Chris What at?

John The stump man. There used to be quite a few of them, all over the bush. Now there's chainsaws, people knock'em off.

Archie This one's got a steel spike up the middle to stop men doing that.

Ella Men!

Archie All right, women have too much sense. You go mad in other ways.

Amy Listening to people, mainly!

John (as a few tourists get out of the bus to study, or photograph, the stump man) All right, I'm shutting up.

Amy gives a loud and protracted yawn.

John My throat's worn out. You take over, Amy.

Amy I'm going to sleep.

Those who've been outside the bus start to get back on, but there is a surprise; the stump man follows them on board.

Stump Off you go, driver. It's time I had a look around. Ah, the Haunted Stream!

Tourists The Haunted Stream!

Stump There was a murder up there, but so what? There's been murders enough along this track ...

Charlie You tell'em, Collingwood! (The stump is black and white.)

Stump Ballarat Harry disappeared, and his horse and dog turned up in Omeo with another man. What do you make of that? But it's fear that gave birth to the name. Miners heard screams in the night and they couldn't sleep. Only owls, but conscience makes a powerful dream. Further in, there's Nightmare Creek and Witch Creek. The contents of the human mind!

Ella What do you call yourself? What are you?

Stump Memory. It's all I've got. I've been sitting there for years, watching you go up and down. You ought to take a look at yourselves. You might get a shock.

Cherry (nervously) You think we're not very nice?

Another sign, The Snakes Back, appears at the front of the bus.

Charlie What about this one, Collie?

The stump man merely laughs, and another sign appears almost at once: Lock-up Creek.

Stump (deeply satisfied) Aaahh. The natural state of man.

Ella Freedom!

Archie Disgrace.

Cheery Shame.

Chris Wondering what the hell's going on.

Stump All of the above, and more. When cops were taking men to face trial, they had to stop, sometimes, so they chained'em up. They chained'em to a log. Men will get away if you give them half a chance.

Amy (still lying on the back seat) Freedom!

Stump The freedom of a germ. A parasite that gets under the skin and eats the body alive.

Ella You're a hard ... whatever you are.

Stump Hybrid. I've got a mind like yours, but I'm not alive. I form judgements that I can't make anyone accept.

A new sign appears: Tuckerbox Point.

Tourists Tuckerbox Point!

Archie Not much harm in this one.

Chris (with his guide book open) It says here that miners picked up their supplies after the coach went through.

Charlie They only tell you what they want you to know. Ah!

This is a comment on the next name appearing, or rather two, because Tambo Crossing appears at the front of the bus, to be replaced by Neoyang, and the two names alternate.

Cherry (guide book open too) Another murder story! (to the stump man) You're right about that!

Stump It took him three weeks to die. In a room at the Walter Scott Hotel.

Ella Sir Walter Scott! Make him respectable!

Stump You needed a front to feel good about yourself, up here.

Amy (from her back seat) Who said it's only up here?

Charlie Neoyang. One of our words. Means a conger eel. Good eating, not easy to catch. (to the stump man) What's your tucker, mate?

Stump I live on air, and stories. They keep me going.
 Cherry It doesn't seem enough.
 Stump I'm the spirit of the place. I never forget a thing.
 Archie That's a bit frightening ...
 Ella How can you keep it all in your head?
 Cherry How can you want to?
 Chris Another one, Collie, is that your name? Why're you getting around in footy gear? Trees don't play footy, that I ever heard of.

Stump Trees talk to ourselves. We whisper in the wind, till it gets wild, and whips us into madness. Then it lashes us with storms. It sends sunlight to calm us, and make us reach for the light. It sends fire to make us panic, and smoke to stifle us. We forget everything in panic, but when it's quiet, our memory comes back. We remember your people Charlie. You looked after us pretty well. We miss you sometimes, but I don't think we'll see you back ...

Charlie We're recovering, you wait a while ...

More signs appear at the front of the bus: Saint Patricks Creek, Thousand Pound Bend, Wild Dog Creek, Bullocky Creek, Double Bridges.

Tourists Wild Dog Creek! Thousand Pound Bend. Bullocky Creek.

John Half an hour to Bruthen! (to the stump man) Do you want to go into town, mate? Or do you want to be dropped off somewhere?

Stump I'll go back pretty soon.
 John Let me know when you want to stop.
 Stump I don't want to stop. I go on with the trees. They've flourished for thousands of years. Fire encourages them. It frightens you, but it gives life to the bush.

The last batch of signs keep appearing at the front of the bus, and the travellers sing their names.

Tourists Double Bridges. Thousand Pound Bend.
 Chris (reading with some amusement) Claude Pendergast collided with two policemen on a motor bike and sidecar. One of the cops was injured. He sued in the Supreme Court and was awarded a thousand pounds!

The busload of passengers is amused. They get up in their seats to have a look. Stump man chooses this moment to disappear.

John Where is he?
 Amy I felt him flying overhead.
 Archie He's gone!
 Ella He's taken me too, a part of me's gone.
 Cherry Check yourselves. Is everyone okay?
 Chris Funny, I feel good.
 John Yes, check yourselves. Is anything missing?
 Amy I don't know where I am, now. I'm all confused.

More names appear at the front of the bus: Walsh's Cutting. Pheasant's Nest. The Ash Range.

John A bloke wrote a great big poem about Gippsland.
And he gave it that very name!

Tourists The Ash Range!

Amy He means the trees. Not the ash you get after a fire.

Cherry Why did the Colliwobble man talk about fire?

Chris He wasn't scared of it. He should be, he's made of wood.

Archie That's a good question. What was he made of?

Chris Meaning what?

Archie I don't know. He came in from outside my mind. He told me things I couldn't know.

Chris (waving his guide book) You've got this to go on.

Archie And it's not enough. I think we've all found this.

Another sign appears: Ramrod Creek.

Tourists Ramrod Creek!

Charlie Boung-war!

John What was that, Charlie?

Charlie Boung-war! Meaning spear.

Chris (reading) A hunter was loading his muzzle-loader with his ramrod when a kangaroo appeared, whereupon he discharged his weapon without removing his ramrod. Well, that's what it says.

Charlie Sort of spear, if you think about it. Whitefella name quite good!

John We'll be arriving in Bruthen in a minute, then lunch in Bairnsdale.

Amy gets up from the back seat, looks around, and regathers herself after the confusion of her trip.

Amy Bernisdale, from the family home of Archibald MacLeod, on the Isle of Sky. Scotland. That's where so many of them came from, and left their marks along the way.

Cherry It says here, MacLeod came back and found lots of newborn children, so he called it ...

Tourists (bleating) Bairns-dale!

John Hang on, we're not there yet!

Charlie Nillung, Narrt-Yarrung, Plundar-wadda-da, Bankalunka, (then vehemently) Bequa, (solemnly) Bruthenmunjie.

Amy Come again, Charlie?

Charlie Nillung. Narrt-yarrung. Plundar-wadda-da. Bankalunka. (again with great power) Bequa. (quietly) Bruthenmunjie. Close your book now. Got no more to tell you. Next time you travel, keep your book closed. Listen for the voices in the wind.

John What about Colliwobbles, Charlie? Is he one of your mob, or one of ours? Does he know what he's talking about?

Charlie (amused) Colliwobbles half and half. Black and white. Got a bit going for him.

John Which half's working, Charlie?

Charlie (not biting) Find that hard to say!

John Bairnsdale, ladies and gentlemen. I'll stop beside our hotel. Half an hour to look about, then lunch.

Amy (more or less back to normal) Thank you for your interest as we drove along. (She's amazed to see that the stump man is back among them as they all get off.) Heavens above!

John Turns up wherever he likes!

Stump (shaking 'hands' as the passengers get off) Remember where you saw me. Think of every place. It's a part of me that you need to own.

Amy And you, Colliwobble, what about you?

Stump It's burned in me now that I need to share. Come back before long. Don't forget. The bush lasts forever and you, my friends, are like a fire that flames, then dies ...

Charlie stands beside the stump man, then John and Amy put themselves on either side, and the passengers (both singers and audience) get off the bus.

This libretto is based on Peter Gardner's *Names of the Great Alpine Road between Bairnsdale and Omeo*, Ngarak Press, Ensay 1997, which was, I think, the first of what is now a series of seven books devoted to the meanings and origins of place names in Eastern Victoria. The work Peter is doing possesses rare value in an age of globalisation.