

# Can Small Islands Tell Large(r) Stories? The Microcosm of Nepean Island, Norfolk Island Archipelago

Joshua Nash<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Discipline of Linguistics, University of New England, Armidale, Australia

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail: [joshua.nash@une.edu.au](mailto:joshua.nash@une.edu.au)

## Abstract

Norfolk Island, South Pacific provides linguists a near laboratory case study in naming, language contact, and environmental management. The two languages spoken on the island, Norfolk – the language of the descendants of the Pitcairn Islanders – and English, are both used in place-naming. This short note analyses the toponyms of Nepean Island, a small uninhabited island 800 metres south of Norfolk. It questions whether Nepean is a microcosm of naming behaviour for the rest of the Norfolk macrocosm. For its size, Nepean contains a large number of toponyms. The paper suggests the uninhabited nature of Nepean may have resulted in fewer commemorative anthroponymic toponyms, a situation unlike naming patterns in the rest of the archipelago. Nepean offers a study of naming a small no-man's land as compared to naming a larger occupied land.

## Nepean Island

Norfolk Island (29°02'S, 167°57'E), a remote isolated island archipelago and external territory of Australia in the southwest Pacific Ocean 1700 kilometres east of the Australian mainland and 1100 kilometres from Auckland, provides toponymists and linguists a near laboratory case study in naming, toponymy, and language change and contact. It has a permanent population of around 2000. About half of this population are descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers who were moved from Pitcairn Island to Norfolk in 1856. The archipelago consists of three major islands and several nearby offshore rocky outcrops. The three islands in the archipelago run from north to south: Norfolk (35 km<sup>2</sup>) is the largest, and two smaller uninhabited islands are Nepean (1 km<sup>2</sup>) and Phillip (5 km<sup>2</sup>) (Figure 1).

What makes Norfolk Island attractive for linguists is its historically diglossic language situation; Norfolk – the language of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian wives – and English, are both spoken on the island and both are used in place-naming. This short note considers the toponyms of Nepean Island, a small uninhabited island 800 metres to the south of Kingston, Norfolk's administrative centre, and questions whether Nepean is a microcosm of naming behaviour representative of the rest of the Norfolk macrocosm. The question posed is whether a small island can tell a larger story of place-naming processes. The results of human habitation on these processes are additionally assessed.

Nepean Island has a large number of toponyms for its size. Its toponyms represent a microtoponymic case study which may be

representative of toponymy on the Norfolk Archipelago as a whole, because the island features a large number of culturally important names within a relatively small area. Despite its small size, Nepean is an important element in the Norfolk landscape. Its grassy craggy topography is clearly visible from most vantage points on the southern region of the larger Norfolk (Figure 2). The 200 Norfolk Island pines which used to cover Nepean were cleared long before the Pitcairners arrived in 1856. The physical makeup of the island bears scars from the first two penal settlements, particularly the Second Settlement (1825-1855), when sandstone quarrying resulted in the well-known area and placename The Convict Steps (Em Steps in Norfolk) on the eastern side of the island. Nepean has a large population of sea birds, and the Norfolk community uses the island for activities like fishing, camping, and collecting eggs of the whale bird, the sooty tern (*Sterna fuscata*), a common sea bird which nests predominantly on Nepean and Phillip.

Aside from research into the natural history of Nepean (see references to Nepean Island in Endersby 2003), management plans for the inclusion of Nepean as a public reserve (Norfolk Island Parks & Forestry Service 2003), a small sketchy map in Coleman (1991: 4), and a few comments on Nepean toponyms in a rambler's (hiker's) guide to Norfolk (Hoare 1994), there has not been a detailed toponymic survey of this small, uninhabited island.

### Methods

Nepean toponyms were collected on three field trips on Norfolk Island between 2008 and 2009. Approximately five informal interviews with members of the community were conducted and subsequent follow up questionnaires based on a more precise list of

placenames derived from archival research and the initial interviews were carried out (a more comprehensive list of Norfolk toponyms is published in Nash (2013)). Table 1 presents a list of Nepean placenames with their history. Figure 3 plots the location of these names.



Figure 1: The Norfolk Archipelago.



Figure 2: Nepean Island topography.

**The Data**

Table 1: Nepean Island toponyms and histories.

Name	History
East End	The easternmost point of the island.
Mary Hamilton Reef/Rocks	An eponymous placename doublet <sup>1</sup> remembering the reef and rocks where the steam liner <i>Mary Hamilton</i> came aground in the early 1900s. It is also the name of a diving site in the same area along with other nearby sites Blues Cathedral and Black Coral.
Poison Bay/Pizen Bay	The location and etymology of this name are questionable. Reliable sources place it on the northern coast, while the <i>Nepean Island – Plan of Management</i> (Norfolk Island Parks & Forestry Service, 2003:1) place it in the location where the placename Up ar Sand appears on the map opposite. It is either named after the ‘poison wind’ which comes from the north east across Norfolk during inclement weather and can burn crops, or because of the local Norfolk ‘poison weed’ which may have been found on Nepean. Pizen Bay is a suspected secondary name attributed to a gentleman by the name of Pizen who

<sup>1</sup> A toponym doublet is where two different versions of one name exist for the same place.

supposedly used to fish here.

The Convict Steps / Em Steps

The English and Norfolk placename doublet for the convict steps which were created when stone was mined by convicts for constructing buildings in Norfolk’s administrative centre in Kingston. Also known as Dem Steps or Em Steps. Although mooring on Nepean is difficult, this is an easy place to gain access to dry land by boat due to the flat rocks at sea level near The Convict Steps.

The Crack, Crack

A location on the far west of Nepean which is a favourite rock fishing site. At low tide one can easily cross from The Crack to West End but during high tide one has to jump because the higher swells submerge the rock passage. This name can take the Norfolk definite article ‘ar’ to form Ar Crack.

The Saddle, Saddle

Descriptive name for the undulating topography which appears like a saddle from one side, especially from Queen Elizabeth Lookout (also known as Lizzies), a turn in the Rooty Hill Road on Norfolk which looks out to Nepean. This name can take the Norfolk definite article ‘ar’ to form Ar Saddle.

The Skull,

A landscape feature on the

Skull	extreme south of Nepean, which when the sun shines on it looks like a skull. This name can take the Norfolk definite article ‘ar’ to form Ar Skull.
The Stump, Stump	Named after the remains of a Norfolk pine which used to be located in the narrow southern portion of Nepean. The Stump was used in locating several offshore fishing grounds, which were lost once The Stump was pushed over. This name can take the Norfolk definite article ‘ar’ to form Ar Stump.
Under Stump	The rocky area at sea level under where The Stump used to stand.
Unicorn	Located between The Stump and The Skull, Unicorn is another pointed landscape feature which has been described as looking like a unicorn.
Up ar Sand	Translated as ‘up on the sand’ or ‘up on the beach’ in English, this is the only sandy area of significant size on Nepean. Although most likely incorrect, several informants have proposed Poison Bay is located here.
West End	The westernmost point of the island.

Like the larger corpus of Norfolk data presented in Nash (2013), the Nepean microcosm presents some generalities that apply to Norfolk toponymy proper:

1. Norfolk toponyms (e.g. Fata Fata) and Nepean toponyms contain Norfolk lexemes.



Figure 3: Nepean Island land-based toponyms

2. Toponym doublets (e.g. Poison Bay / Pizen Bay) are present on Norfolk (e.g. Kingston / Down-a-Town).
3. Descriptive names are common on Nepean as on Norfolk.
4. Two commemorative names (e.g. Mary Hamilton Reef / Rocks) exist on Nepean as they do on Norfolk (e.g. Johnnies Stone). However, Nepean commemorative names are not named after Norfolk Islanders (Pitcairn descendants) as they are on larger Norfolk.
5. Non-proper monolexemes (i.e. single words, in this case nouns with or without

articles) are productive as toponyms on Nepean (e.g. Skull, The Stump) and on Norfolk (e.g. Cascade). However, monolexemes on Norfolk are typically commemorative (e.g. Monty) whereas there are no commemorative monolexeme toponyms on Nepean.

6. The microtoponymy of Nepean illustrates how the locations, histories, and language of placenames become obscured. For example, by analysing the linguistic form and cultural history of a toponym doublet such as Poison Bay / Pizen Bay, it is unclear whether either or both names are English or Norfolk.

### Small Islands, Larger Stories?

On returning to the question of whether small islands can tell large(r) toponymic stories, there is a key difference between Nepean and Norfolk monolexemes: Norfolk monolexemes (e.g. Monty, Barnaby, Avalon) are often commemorative where Nepean's, being largely descriptive, are not (e.g. Stump, Unicorn). This difference could possibly be attributed to the fact that Nepean is uninhabited whereas Norfolk is inhabited. As a microcosm, Nepean toponymy illustrates an incomplete version of Norfolk toponymy; Nepean and Norfolk are different, most strikingly in terms of how human habitation is represented in place-naming. Nepean's offering of a study of naming a small 'no-man's land' as compared to the naming of the larger 'occupied land' of Norfolk reveals significant differences.

Joshua Nash's research intersects ethnography, the anthropology of religion, architecture, pilgrimage studies, and language documentation. He is a postdoctoral research fellow in linguistics at the University of New England, Armidale.

Received: 30, April 2015

Accepted: 17, May 2015



The microtoponymy of Nepean Island, an island uninhabitable due to the lack of running water and shelter, provides insight into what tools humans use to utilise, understand, and describe a small and yet well-visited and historically significant geographical area. This short note has documented and mapped Nepean placenames and presented a resource which other toponymists and linguists can use in future research into small island toponymies.

### Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the suggestions and feedback of two anonymous reviewers and the editorial assistance of Stephan Riedel.

### References

- Coleman, N. (1991) *The Nature of Norfolk Island*, Sea Resource Centre, Rochedale South, Queensland.
- Endersby, I. (2003) *Bibliography of Norfolk Island Natural History: Bishop Museum occasional papers no. 7*, Bishop Museum Press, Honolulu.
- Green, T. H. (1973) Petrology and Geochemistry of Basalts from Norfolk Island, *Journal of the Geological Society of Australia* 20(3), 259-272.
- Hoare, M. (1994) *Rambler's Guide to Norfolk Island*, Photopress International, Norfolk Island.
- Nash, J. (2013) *Insular Toponymies: Place-naming on Norfolk Island, South Pacific and Dudley Peninsula, Kangaroo Island*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- Norfolk Island Parks and Forestry Service (2003) *Nepean Island—Plan of Management*, Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly, Norfolk Island.