

grandfather's rain-making ritual faithfully recounted by an old bushman in the "Aboriginalities" section of the *Bulletin* (Huie, 2011).

By the early twentieth century, Australians spoke of Hughie as if he were a knockabout god – an equal, a mate. But that's not how he began. In the 1880s, the thirsty stockmen of Narrandera were not appealing for divine intervention when they appealed to Hughie. They were recalling a local man's audacity. They were saluting John Ziegler Huie and his meteorological cannon.

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Brickfielders and Bursters

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The Australian Meteorological & Oceanographic Society (AMOS) has been running a competition to name Melbourne's hot northerly wind, and the winners have just been announced (see News in this issue). Our Melbourne members had felt somewhat envious of other cities and regions that have names for the winds that distinguish them. Even Sydney has its "southerly buster". So Kevin Walsh proposed that we invite members and the public to suggest a name. I ended up doing a few radio interviews about the competition and in some hectic research to prepare for these I realised that at some time in the past we did have a name for this wind: "brickfielder".

On 16 March 1940 *The Argus* carried an article titled "North winds might be worse – if they lasted longer" (page 8).¹ *The Argus* called the northerly wind a "brickfielder" and pointed out that it was "...our best-known wind, because it makes strong men into weaklings, it frays tempers, ruins appetites, blows down trees, spreads bush fires, and really gives us something to complain about." The article compared the brutal nature of Melbourne's northerly with other named winds such as the Mediterranean's Mistral that "...lures the English southward to look at the sun, even though they only feel the wind. Melbourne will never draw tourists to feel its northerly."

¹ This followed shortly after Melbourne's record March high of 41.7°C on 11 March 1940 – Ed.

So, when did "brickfielder" start to be used to denote a hot, northerly wind? And why? Where was it used in this way? And what happened to the term?

Claire Fenby from the School of Earth Sciences at The University of Melbourne forwarded the following quote, indicating that the term was used in Geelong by the mid-19th century: "On Saturday we were visited with a regular 'brickfielder,' the dust occasionally rising in impenetrable columns, and totally obscuring the sky; the wind blew hot and strong from the north; the heat in the middle of the day was oppressive, which joined to the thick clouds of dust made it anything but agreeable." (*Geelong Advertiser*, 28 October 1850).

It appears to have been a common term in Sydney around that time, although not referring to a hot wind. A Mr Lovegrove is quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 29 July 1896 thus: "When I arrived in 1852 the word was applied to the southerly-burster, hot or cold, which, sweeping down the grassless slope about Brickfield Hill, became charged with yellow dust, and being further added to in its course along unpaved and irregular George-street and Pitt-street, reached the Circular Quay as a blinding yellow storm equal to a London fog, plus wind and clay and sand. A fine vessel lying out in the stream, midway between Dawes Point and Milson's Point, had just employed her crew in repainting the ship

from truck to water line. She was completely spoilt by the 'brickfielder', and the captain informed me he would never try to paint again in Sydney Harbour. Brickfield Hill is now covered with houses and the streets are paved, including the footpaths, hence the disappearance of 'brickfielders'."

The effect of these southerly, dust-laden winds on Sydney residents is described by CRAYON, writing in the *Australasian Chronicle* on 4 February, 1840: "...with its penetrating dust, sharp as a Sydney lawyer, prying into your peepers, and softly insinuating itself into your inward man, is any thing but agreeable, despite its novelty. If you ensconce yourself behind a clear pane of glass, to protect your eyes, and an air-tight door, to defend your stomach, you may view with indifference the floating mist that with its rich brown dust mantles les pauvres diables who chance to be puddling along...look at that old dame at her stall – all her pyramidical arrangements of peaches (this is the land of peaches and one pound notes) - all are overthrown, her whole attention is divided between them and her petticoats."

Sometimes the winds were potentially more dangerous than to a lady's petticoats. The *Sydney Monitor* on 10 October 1829 noted "On Monday last His Excellency and family were placed in considerable danger whilst sailing in consequence of a brickfielder coming on, which nearly capsized the boat" (quoted in Hughes, 1989).

In one of a series of articles on meteorology published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (7 February 1842), the correspondent bemoaned the absence of a name for Sydney's hot winds and even thought the word "Brickfielder" was "a word as inexpressive and as absurd as anything could well be devised, but for which, as well as for the general phrase "hot wind" it is not easy, though scientifically needed, to find a substitute. It would naturally occur to the mind that a 'Brickfielder' itself was a hot and not a cold wind, but it is just the contrary. We want some term to express the peculiar wind called a 'hot-wind'.... The 'Brickfielder' would then fall back upon its legitimate title a South-Wester, or Southerly squall."

The term was used to denote a cool southwesterly from well before this time. In the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* of 16 February 1830, a correspondent is describing a period of very hot weather: "Every body looked out anxiously for a good dusting, hoping that each successive hour would bring along with it a hearty

'Brickfielder' - far better be pelted with dust than burnt to a cinder. But all in vain. Up to the hour at which we noted down this poor bill of particulars, no relief had come. No sea-breeze kissed the burning cheek; no south-wester bellowed consolation; no thunder-storm had chastised the pestiferous atmosphere; no weeping clouds had shed their compassions upon the torrid ground!"

Everywhere else however, from Hobart to Adelaide via Melbourne and the country districts of the southern states, there is no question that "brickfielder" referred to a hot northerly wind, often carrying a heavy load of dust. H. H. Wheelwright (1861) noted, "In Melbourne a hot-wind day is called a 'brickfielder', on account of the dust, which darkens the sky" (quoted in Wilkes, 2008). The same applied to many parts of New South Wales outside the colonial capital.

But some correspondents thought that these winds, although annoying, were hardly a major hazard. Thus, a correspondent in the *Adelaide Advertiser and Register* on 15 September 1931 says, "A shrewd observer has noted in Australians a marked tendency to the worship of their climate. Our worship, no doubt, like that of certain savage races, is qualified by large infusions of mere abuse expended on the object of our regard. When the thermometer rises to 110 degrees in the shade, or a brickfielder is scourging us with clouds of dust, the average Australian can invent nothing too injurious to say about his climate. Nevertheless, when we consider what other lands have to suffer from the tyranny of climate we may well believe that the conditions of sky and air and sun, of breeze and rainfall - all of which make up what is called the 'climate' under which we live — are the most benignant on the planet."

What caused the high dust content of the brickfielder? There was a widespread notion that this was due to dust from nearby brickfields. H. A. Hunt (who was later to become Australia's first Commonwealth Meteorologist) in *An Essay On Southerly Bursters* published in 1896 (Abercromby, 1896) pointed out that "In the early days of Australian settlement, when the shores of Port Jackson were occupied by a sparse population, and the region beyond was unknown wilderness and desolation, a great part of the Haymarket was occupied by the brickfields from which Brickfield Hill takes its name. When a 'Southerly Burster' struck the infant city, its approach was always heralded by a cloud of reddish dust from this locality, and in consequence the phenomenon gained the local

name of 'brickfielder.' The brickfields have long since vanished, and with them the name to which they gave rise, but the wind continues to raise clouds of dust under its modern name of 'Southerly Burster.'"

Others suggested it was sandhills, rather than brickfields themselves, that were the source of the dust. Thus *Fraser's Magazine* issue 48 of 1853 says "When the wind blows strongly from the southward, it is what the Sydney people call a 'brickfielder'; that is it carries with it dense clouds of red dust or sand, like brick dust, swept from the light soil which adjoins the town on that side, and so thick that the houses and streets are actually hidden; it is a darkness that may be felt." Similarly, Frank Fowler (*The Athenaeum*, 21 February 1863) asserted that the brickfielder is "but another name for the cold wind, or southerly buster, which follows the hot breeze, and which, blowing over an extensive sweep of sandhills called the Brickfields, semi-circling Sydney, carries a thick cloud of dust (or 'brickfielder') across the city." (both these quotes are from Morris, 1898).

Not everyone agreed with either of these diagnoses, though. An article by "A Ship's Surgeon", published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 1 November 1849, asserted that the dust was the result of dirty streets, and that "Once carefully swept, and the accumulation removed from the town, your streets being daily swept as they ought to be, the brickfielder would be shorn of its disagreeable properties." Further, he proposed that candidates for the municipal elections soon to be held should be asked "What is the origin and cause of a brickfielder, and how do you propose to remedy the evil?" It seems that the brickfielder was the mid-19th century global warming, and electors needed to know the position of all political candidates on the subject.

Others, according to the Rev. J. H. Zillmann (*Australian Life*, 1889), thought the hot winds were healthy: "Scientific men, however, tell us that these hot winds are just what make Australia so healthy a climate – that they act as scavengers and without them the death-rate of the colonies would be alarmingly great".

Whether they were cold or hot winds, healthy or unhealthy, brickfielders continued to crop up in literature and newspapers through the middle of the 20th century. Patrick White uses the term in his novel *Voss*. But in the *Macquarie Australian Dictionary* (published in 2004) the term was deemed "obsolete". I am sure the "new" name for our hot northerly wind will not suffer this fate.

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Note: Many of the newspaper references in this article are available on the National Library of Australia's Trove website: trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper – Ed.