

Oz sticky-fingered claim to our honey

I want to start this column on a generous note by saying some nice things about Australians. No, don't turn away - you, like me, must surely have had some positive experiences involving our "big" cousins.

You, like me, would not necessarily have agreed with Rob Muldoon when he said Kiwis migrating to Australia would lift the IQ of both nations (goodness knows how he managed to agree on a trade deal with them in 1982).

My admiration (possibly not the right word) for Ozzies was heightened in the late 70s when a young Sydney reporter joined us at the Auckland Star and introduced Kiwi daily newspaper readers to the joys of the "death-knock".

Once the preserve of Truth and its disreputable sister Sunday News, the death-knock approach to journalism is brutally simple – knock on the door of someone involved in a tragedy and persuade them to spill. After Paddy's short spell with us, prior to his return to Sydney we recognised his gift to our country by presenting him with a door-knocker mounted on a piece of polished kauri. Such was our large-mindedness.

Later, I met plenty of excellent Australians in the realms of journalism and tertiary education. They were tough buggers. During one conference in Vanuatu, one was rushed to hospital with digitalis poisoning after eating an unlucky fish at one of the banquets. He was expected to die, but years later I ran into him in a Sydney bar, drinking as only Ozzies can.

So, I don't harbour any ill-will towards Okkers when I write about their latest attempt to colonise us - the move by their honey harvesters to lay claim to the insanely successful mānuka honey industry. Their strategy – likened by some to the pavlova and Russell Crowe claims – involves a brand fight over the words "mānuka honey", a product that has achieved global fame for a wide range of real and questionable medicinal benefits.

One of our scientists was the first to discover antiseptic properties of certain varieties of the honey back in the 80s, work he and others expanded in the 90s, leading eventually to our honey people moving to register the brand to protect what has become a successful export industry earning the country \$280 million a year, a number expected to grow to more than a billion.

Except that now our trans-Tasman mates are laying claim to manuka honey. Note I've left the macron off the word when I use it here, because I doubt Ozzies have ever heard of macrons (indicating Māori words with drawn-out vowel sounds).

And yet here they are trying to tell us "manuka" is a commonly used Australian word. Their journalists are writing that Canberra has a suburb by that name, as well as Manuka Oval, Manuka Shops, Manuka Swimming Pool, and Manuka Circle. They fail to mention that's because the American architect who designed Australia's capital in 1912 used the word in expectation New Zealand would join the Federation of Australia.

Meantime, someone named Trevor from the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council claims he has evidence the word was used by Aboriginals in Tasmania, where the same plant grows. Show us your evidence, Trev, māate. I'm sure fellow Daily News columnist Dennis Ngawhare would be interested to see it.

What complicates things is the plant species from which our bees make the best quality mānuka honey – the Pākehā-named "tea tree" with the scientific label *Leptospermum scoparium* – is an Oz import. It's regarded as indigenous to both New Zealand and Australia, but found its way here from south-east Oz in very ancient times, then was spread by Māori and later European settlers clearing forests with fire.

Australians didn't call it "manuka" until the honey got popular. Before that, they called it tea tree, like many Kiwi Europeans.

JT column for October 7 2017 – mānuka honey

While our *Leptospermum scoparium* is more widespread here than the variety growing in Australia, the mildly galling thing is they have more than 80 variations of the genus, one or more of which appear to make good “manuka” honey, as well. They’re still testing their versions.

Actually, the Kiwi mānuka honey industry faces potentially worse threats than the Oz name-grab. After a stellar international year in 2014-15 (celebrities like Kim Kardashian raved about it) our sales hit a bump the following season when doubts were cast over some of the medicinal claims, bad weather cut production (bees don’t like rain and cold), and there were some cowboy activities by a few industry newcomers.