

Charles Sturt – A Founder of South Australia?

Speech by Arthur Jeeves to Pioneers Association 28th January 2005

The question of whether or not Captain Charles Sturt was one of the Founders of South Australia, continues to engage and divide historians to this very day. His biographer Mrs NG (Beatrix) Sturt, whose work was based on actual conversations with Sturt himself and her access to his journals and personal papers, lists the foundation of South Australia as the result of the Murray Expedition of 1829-30, and she categorically states that the colony owed its being to him. In this she was no doubt guided by the claims made by Sturt himself when in later life he sought to be appointed to the post of Governor of Queensland. In his biography "Sturt of The Murray", Michael Langley reverentially accords to him the title of "The Father of Australian Exploration", attributes the settlement of the colony to the Murray Expedition, and propounds the theory that "Wakefield's original inspiration, applied to Sturt's discovery, was the vehicle by which South Australia was created.¹ Cumpston in his biography "Charles Sturt: His Life and Journey's of Exploration", ranks Sturt as "one of the real founders of South Australia", whilst Carnegie and Swan in their biography "In Step With Sturt", introduce new material and expert surveying opinion to challenge Langley's assertion that Sturt was "The Father of Australian Exploration", or that he was even our greatest explorer. Edgar Beale, one of the last and most scholarly of all his biographers, in his work "Sturt The Chipped Idol", clinically disassembles the myth and legend surrounding Charles Sturt, to portray him as a brave man, a product of his time, who may have suffered from a parasitical infection (*Toxoplasma Gondii*) that caused the periodic bouts of blindness that afflicted him from time to time. He further subjects Sturt's journals, writings and recorded behaviour to clinical psychological analysis, to demonstrate that he may also have suffered from a psychiatric condition, which at times caused him to lapse into bouts of self pity, depression, and delusion, because he had not been accorded the greatness that he believed was due to him.² In canvassing this hypothesis, Beale's medical expert, Sir Kenneth Noad, who is highly regarded in medical circles for his special interest in neurological diseases, concludes his diagnosis of the evidence before him by stating the somewhat obvious that "*The Sturt Story is fascinating and an enigma. The real man we will never know*". Manning Clark, ever the pragmatist, attributed Sturt's problems to the fact that he had a domineering wife! I believe however that we can adopt a more sanguine approach, because the real Charles Sturt is still to be found in his journals and writings as is the answer to the question as to whether or not he was the explorer, discoverer, or the founder of South Australia. For that we must revisit the events and writings of the past.

This year marks the 175th anniversary of that morning of February 9, 1830, when the whaleboat carrying Captain Charles Sturt and his party reached a point on the river where for the first time in many weeks they could see a clear horizon to the South. Here they landed and climbing to a high point on the left bank of the river to survey the country, Sturt recorded in his journal "Immediately below me was a beautiful lake, which appeared to be a fitting reservoir for the noble stream that had led us to it; and which was now ruffled by the breeze that swept over it".³ To his right were the distant ranges stretching from south to north, terminating abruptly at a lofty mountain which he incorrectly assumed to be the same feature that Matthew Flinders had named "Mount Lofty" in 1802, and immediately westwards was the ocean and the outfall where the waters of the lake entered "Encounter Bay". Thirty three (33) days after they had set out in that whaleboat, from their depot near the present town of "Maude" in New South Wales, and 2,000 miles by his own calculations, Charles Sturt and his party reached their journey's end at 2.00pm, when they entered that lake he was to name "Lake Alexandrina" in honour of the Princess who was to become Her Sovereign Majesty, "Queen Victoria".

On this his second expedition, Sturt had followed the Murrumbidgee River on land from Jugiong in New South Wales until halted by the extensive marshlands, which he discovered were fed by the waters of the "Lachlan River", and from thence seeped into the Murrumbidgee. There on the banks of that river he assembled and launched the whaleboat

¹ Langley, Pages 53, 78-79, 141, 141, 144, 191, 226; Cumpston, Page 82; Mrs NG Sturt, Pages 90, 218.

² Beale, Pages 155-156, 161-162.

³ Two Expeditions, Volume 2, Page 157.

on its waters which he traced to their junction with what he described as “a broad and noble stream”, which he continued to follow to its confluence with yet another large river flowing into it from the north, near “Wentworth” in New South Wales. This he correctly adjudged to be the Darling River which he had previously discovered on his first expedition in 1828 and named in honour of Governor Darling, and it was at this juncture that he named his “broad and noble stream” the “Murray” in honour of Sir George Murray, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies. This act was a grave injustice to his friend and mentor Hamilton Hume, whom he could not have failed to know had previously discovered that same broad and noble stream near the now site of Albury, in 1824, and named it the “Hume” in honour of his father. Sturt then continued to follow the Murray until it entered Lake Alexandrina and the sea at Encounter Bay, and by that journey and voyage of exploration, he had finally solved the riddle of the inland river system of Southern Australia. Sturt had proved that many of the rivers of New South Wales lying to the East of the Great Dividing Range formed part of an extensive watershed that found its way to the South Central coast of South Australia, where those waters entered the sea. This discovery opened up new lands for future settlement, profoundly affected the future course of Australian history and gained for him his place in history and that fame he believed was his destiny, but it did not bring with it the fortune he craved.

In compensation for his personal expenditures on the expedition, Governor Darling gave him a small grant of land which he sold and distributed part of the proceeds to the other members who had shared the dangers of the journey, but the military promotion he sought was denied him. He was returned to garrison duties where he remained until early 1832, at which time he returned to England for medical treatment. Here he was to embark on the next phase of his life by publishing the account of his exploration of the Murray/Darling River system of Southern Australia, which he titled “Two Expeditions into Southern Australia 1829-30”. This book became a best seller and containing as it did in Chapter VIII, the records of the 1831 exploration by the late Captain Collett Barker of the 39th Regiment of Foot, they arguably provided the stimulus that led to the settlement of the Colony of South Australia.

In 1831, in response to Charles Sturt's recommendation that the country around Lake Alexandrina was worthy of a closer and more attentive examination, Governor Darling directed Captain Collett Barker, also of the 39th Regiment of Foot, who was returning to Sydney on board the schooner *Isabella* from duty in King George's Sound in Western Australia, to proceed to Cape Jervis, “*from which point it was thought he could best carry on a survey not only of the coast but also the interior*”.⁴ They arrived off Cape Jervis on April 13, 1831, commenced to explore the coast, and on the 17th, in the company of Mr John Kent of the Commissariat, his servant Mill, and two soldiers, Collett Barker explored the area finding good water, good soil and pasture. Leaving the two soldiers in bivouac, Barker and the others next climbed Mount Lofty, explored the range and discovered the mountain that in 1830 Sturt had mistaken for Mount Lofty. He was later to admit to this mistake, amend his charts and name that feature Mount Barker in honour of his brother officer who had discovered it. The exploration continued in its various forms until the party reached the mouth of the Murray where Captain Barker swam across the fast flowing channel and climbed the large sand hill previously noted by Sturt, and there he met an untimely end. Having climbed this feature he vanished from sight of the party, never to be seen again.

Later inquiries revealed that he had been fatally speared by the aboriginals, his body thrown into the sea and carried away by the currents. The sand hill he climbed on that fateful day is now named “Barker's Knoll”, but today it is but a shadow of what it was when sketched by the colonial artist, George French Angas in 1845. Thus died a brave soldier and true gentleman, the records of whose explorations, along with the subsequent observations of Mr Kent, were to finally decide the proposed site for the settlement of the Colony of South Australia. To Barker and Kent must go that credit, not Charles Sturt, who was merely fulfilling the role of Captain Collett Barker's posthumous messenger.

Back in England in 1834, following the publication of his two volumes, and no doubt influenced by the knowledge that the 39th Regiment of Foot had been assigned to duty in India, Charles Sturt sold his commission, took a military pension of £100 per annum, made application for a settler's land grant, married Charlotte Green, and set sail for the Colony of New South Wales. The Sturts first settled on a 1,300 acre property at Bargo Brush, near Mittagong, about

⁴ Two Expeditions, Volume 2, Page 222.

70 miles from Sydney, where in 1837 their first son, Napier George, was born. They then moved to a 1,000 acre property Sturt had purchased at Varroville, where in 1838 his second son, Charles Sheppey, was born. Meanwhile he had negotiated for a grant of 5,000 acres, in recognition of his 1828-29-30 expeditions, but it was conditional on his relinquishing his military pension of £100 per annum, which did not please him even though it was a very good arrangement.

Sturt selected his land in what is now the Australian Capital Territory, at a well watered site bounded by the Murrumbidgee, and Molongolo rivers, and the Ginnendera creek. He was now a man of some substance holding 7,300 acres of land and Governor Bourke had submitted his name for appointment to serve on the Colony's Legislative Council, but it was not to be. The Colonial Office chose not to appoint him, and his fortunes did not flourish because of successive years of drought, which led him to overland cattle to the Colony of South Australia, which at that time was enduring financial chaos and food shortages. In this he was encouraged by his young friend Edward John Eyre, who in December 1837 had left the present site of Canberra with a mob of cattle he intended to overland, and the knowledge that in January 1838, two pastoralists, Hawdon and Bonney, had left Melbourne with another large mob. In April 1838, Sturt formed a consortium with a group of wealthy Sydney merchants, on whose behalf he set out with 300 head of cattle, but his choice of route had more to do with exploration than commerce, because at heart Sturt was a dreamer.

After an incredible journey of ten weeks, Hawdon and Bonney arrived in Adelaide with their cattle in excellent condition, and they made a tidy profit. Eyre, who had previously overlanded stock to Port Phillip Bay, followed a route suggested by Sturt, but he became lost on the way and had to retrace much of his journey. He finally arrived in Adelaide and being a shrewd businessman he managed to sell his stock for a fair price, and therein is another story. Sturt however decided to follow the course of the Murray from the place near Albury, where Hume and Hovell had crossed it in 1824. His purpose of filling in the unknown course of the Murray above the Murrumbidgee junction, was commendable but it was a poor business decision because he did not arrive in Adelaide until the beginning of September 1838, with his cattle in poor condition, at a time when few people had any money left with which to pay for them. However, he was enthusiastically welcomed, accorded a public dinner, and the acting Governor sought his assistance to settle the ongoing dispute surrounding Colonel Light's selection of the site of Adelaide as the colony's Capital.

Sturt rose to the challenge, exploring all the available sites including what is now Port Adelaide, and as far afield as Victor Harbour, Port Elliott and the much favoured Murray outfall at Encounter Bay. He returned and reported to the acting Governor that of all the sites inspected Colonel Light's choice was the best, thereby settling the matter, enabling the land sales upon which the economy of the colony was dependent to proceed with confidence. Full credit must be given to Sturt for this decision, which was without doubt crucial to the future success of the colony, and the manner in which it was accepted by the colonists, was attributable to the universal respect in which he was held.

The acting Governor, George Stephens, then offered Sturt the position of Colonial Surveyor, which he refused, but when it was later offered to him by Governor Gawler he accepted, sold his holdings in New South Wales, took a ship and in 1839 he arrived in the colony with his family and settled on Town Acre 288, which was on the north eastern corner of Hutt and Wakefield streets, where in that year his third son, Evelyn Gawler was born. Sturt took up the survey work abandoned by Colonel Light, but his appointment was to prove short lived with the arrival of Lieutenant Frome from England, where he had been appointed by the Colonial Office, as the Colonial Surveyor of South Australia. Sturt accepted his demotion with good grace, formed a lasting friendship with Frome, was appointed by Governor Gawler to the position of Assistant Commissioner of Lands, and together with B.T. Finniss he continued with the all important land surveys. In 1840, he built his new home on property which he had both purchased, and granted, in the area known as the "Reed Beds", which he named "Grange", where the family settled, but Sturt's domestic contentment was not to last, and for that he had nobody but himself to blame.

Being aware that because of the precarious state of the Colony's finances Governor Gawler was to be recalled, Sturt considered himself to be a suitable candidate for the job. He was also aware that the 29 year old Captain George Grey who had explored the northern region of Western Australia was also a candidate for the office. In his memorial to the Secretary of State in London, Sturt reminded him of the high handed manner in which he had been deprived of the position of Colonial Surveyor, and having pressed his case he tactlessly stated, "*The appointment of Captain Grey, an officer much my junior in years and of less experience, would place me as subordinate to him in a situation which I could not but feel embarrassing and humiliating etc*". Grey got the job, saw the letter, and the stage was set for what followed. Along with many others, Sturt's salary of £600 per annum was reduced to £400. Grey later increased it to £600 and again reduced it to £400, the friction between them deteriorated into acrimony and increased to open hostility. Sturt had a young family to support, and the reduction in salary hit him so hard that in January 1843, he sent a memorial to London seeking redress of his situation. In this memorial he set out the train of events that led him to sell up and move to South Australia, the sacrifices and losses it entailed and his subsequent treatment by Grey. It is also interesting to note that for the first time Sturt presses his case by claiming that "*In the establishment of this province, save as its discoverer he had no share*".⁵ Notwithstanding his claim to be the discoverer of South Australia, the Board of Commissioners in London left the matter to the indulgence of Lord Stanley, which might account for what next happened.

Having achieved nothing by the memorial, Sturt sought the only other way he knew to escape from Grey, by pressing for permission to lead an expedition to the centre of the continent to find the mythical inland sea. Lord Stanley, in London, granted his petition and the departure was arranged for August 10, 1844. With sixteen men, 11 horses, 32 bullocks, 5 drays, 1 horse dray, a whaleboat, 200 sheep, 4 kangaroo dogs and 2 sheep dogs, the party left Adelaide and headed northwards into a country that was in the grip of a terrible drought. Pressing northwards, Sturt encountered a feature he named "The Barrier Ranges", recording that the area exhibited good ore bearing potential.

So great was his haste to reach the centre of Australia, that he traversed what was later to become known as Broken Hill, without giving any serious thought to prospecting the area or sending ore samples back to Adelaide for assay. Experiencing many privations because of the acute shortage of water, all the while exploring to right and left they found and named a number of creeks, until the expedition reached their first permanent water at a place they named Depot Glen on January 27, 1845, where they were to be marooned for six months.

When rain fell in early July 1845, Sturt decided to send some of the party home under command of James Poole who was seriously ill from scurvy, but he died the second day out, on July 15, 1845, so they returned and buried him at Mount Poole. Three days later the party left under the command of Piesse, whilst Sturt headed north until he reached a point 250 kilometres from the centre of Australia on Sept 8, 1845, but he was forced to return due lack of water. A final journey led to the discovery of a body of water Sturt named Cooper Creek, following which he was again forced to return to the depot, black from scurvy and near to death. Rain again fell around December 7, 1845, and Doctor John Harriss Browne, who by now had taken charge of the party, determined that they would make a desperate dash back to civilisation. Killing bullocks, to use their skins as huge, putrid, water bottles of 160 gallons each, and supplementing that with the hoped for surface water from the recent rains, they set out for Medindie which they reached on Christmas Eve, where Piesse was waiting with fresh supplies. The party later returned to Adelaide arriving on January 18, 1846. They had been gone eighteen months, having found no fertile land and no inland sea. However, during their absence the economy of the colony had improved with the discovery of copper, and the hated Grey had gone to New Zealand and been replaced by Governor Robe.

Sturt resumed his duty as Registrar-General, and in March he became the Colonial Treasurer, on a salary of £500 per annum. On May 24, 1846, the Royal Geographical Society awarded him its Gold Medal for his epic journey to Central Australia. In May 1847 Sturt and his family departed to England on leave from which he did not return until August 1849, during which time he wrote and published the story of the 1844-46 expedition which he titled "Narrative of an

⁵ Mrs N.G. Sturt, Page 215.

Expedition into Central Australia". Upon his return to Adelaide, Sturt was appointed Colonial Secretary at a salary of £700 per annum and happily occupied that position until 1851, when his diminishing sight forced him to retire. The family sailed for England in 1853 where they settled at Cheltenham. For the next sixteen years Sturt continued to maintain an interest in colonial affairs. Less easy to understand were his aspirations to become a Colonial Governor, since in 1851 he had been forced to retire from public service due to his failing eyesight and poor health. He applied unsuccessfully to be appointed Governor of Victoria when Hotham died in 1855.

Sturt again applied unsuccessfully, in 1858, to be appointed the first Governor of Queensland. It was on this occasion that in pressing his claim for the office, he informed Lord Stanley *"My services are generally and generously acknowledged and recognized not only in the Colonies but at home and I am sure they will not be undervalued by anyone so just and generous as Your Lordship for not only do the Australian Colonies stand indebted to me for most important benefits but my country owes me the establishment of one of its fairest and most flourishing possessions and all Commercial and Social advantages resulting therefrom"*.⁶ Edgar Beale highlights this letter to illustrate that in fifteen years, Sturt had in his mind, graduated from being the discoverer of South Australia, to its prime founder, which claim is obviously unsustainable.

So, on the evidence before us, what is the truth of the matter? Was Captain Charles Sturt, as he claimed in 1858, the discoverer of South Australia, was he the founder of one of Her Majesty's most flourishing possessions, or was he merely a deluded fraud who sought credit for the achievement of others, which upon reflection seems a somewhat harsh assessment?

I would respectfully suggest that, on the face of it, the truth appears to be contained in Sir Archibald Grenfell Price's inaugural address to this body in 1935. In that paper he accords recognition to Charles Sturt as an early explorer of the province and one of its greatest pioneers, but he does not count him amongst its founders, for they were very special people from whom many of you are descended. Indisputably, it was your forebears, who came to Holdfast Bay and by their privations and suffering were the true founders of the unique State of South Australia. It was their privations and vision for a truly free society that was ultimately to lead the world in recognizing the land rights of indigenous people, giving women the right to vote, and profoundly influence the events that led to the Federation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. In fixing the site of Adelaide in 1838 Captain Sturt made all that possible, and it is for that that he should be remembered and honoured.

⁶ Letter Sturt to Lord Stanley, 27.5.1858, in Sturt Papers, Rhodes House.