



Charles Sturt (Circa 1846)

STURT'S FORGOTTEN JOURNEY 1838



"Overlanders" S. T. Gill C 1880

Sturt's Overland Cattle Drive from Goulburn (NSW) to Adelaide 23rd May – 27th August 1838

Following his 1829-30 exploration of the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, Sturt resigned from the army, married, and became a farmer in New South Wales but he was not to prosper. Between the years 1836 to 1839 the settlers of New South Wales experienced a calamitous drought which caused widespread ruin. Pastures and crops failed, stock prices fell, and wool could not be sent to Sydney because there was a shortage of water for haulage animals along the way. Sturt's biographer recorded of those that tried "*The lines of road were unwholesome from the number of cattle and horses that had dropped dead upon them*". Things were at their lowest ebb but hope was on the horizon.

In late 1837 reports were received of a shortage of stock in the new settlement of South Australia and thus began the first overland cattle drives to supply that new market. Hawdon and Bonney were the first to set out in January 1838, followed two weeks later by Edward John Eyre. They in turn were followed by Charles Sturt, whose journey, like that of Edward John Eyre, was to change his life and profoundly influence the history of Australia.



At the end of April 1838, Sturt set out from Sydney and on the 8th of May arrived at the point where Hume and Hovell had crossed the "Hume" river (near the present site of Albury) on their 1824 journey of exploration. Near this place was "Fowler's Station" where Sturt mustered his mob of 300 cattle and a party of men amongst whom were, **Giles Strangways**, whose brother (Bewes Strangways) was then acting as the temporary Colonial Secretary of Adelaide), Mr. MacLeod a friend of Sturt's from his Norfolk Island days, Captain John Finnis of the merchant service, a flamboyant character who had previously engaged in sealing and whaling ventures, Fraser, the former soldier who had accompanied Sturt on his 1829-30 "Murray" River expedition, Robert Flood, who later accompanied Sturt on his 1844-45 Central Expedition, and a man named "Lomas" who was apparently a former convict.

The party left "Fowler's Station" on the 22nd of May, travelling along the northern banks of the "Hume", because Sturt had decided to trace, and map the course of that stream, and record the rivers and creeks that flowed into it, to its junction with the Murrumbidgee at which point he had entered it in 1830. He also recorded, with some horror, that the native populations that he had noted in 1829 had been significantly reduced by disease and that many of the survivors were pitted as if by smallpox. On the 8th of June they reached the junction of the "Delangen" River and on the 9th using the cart as a punt they floated it across to the southern bank of the "Hume", following which, and with some difficulty they swam the cattle across.



However, help was near at hand. **Finnis** (pictured left) met up with Eyres and Bewes Strangways who had set out with very welcome supplies, and at nine o'clock at night he led them into Sturt's camp. On the following day Giles Strangways and Fraser arrived with larger supplies, explaining that their delay in returning was because they had had been impeded for five days by dense scrub. Eyre then led the party to a nearby waterhole where the stock quenched their thirst and were saved.

On the 27th of August 1838 Sturt reached a point just under Mount Barker, some 25 miles from Adelaide, where he established his cattle party "at a station on a clear rivulet falling into a lake amid a luxuriant pasture", and thus ended the journey commenced on the 23rd of May in that year. Sturt then travelled on to Adelaide where he called on Mr. Stephens, the Acting Governor, received a tumultuous welcome from the citizenry, and on the 7th September a public dinner was given in his honour at "Beck's Store", in Flinders Street, at which he spoke of his journey and his impressions of the country he had traversed.

It was also at this time he made his observations as to the limitations of "Encounter Bay" as a suitable anchorage for shipping vessels as he had seen it in 1830, and announced that he would immediately lead a party back to that area to test establish the true state of affairs and to report his findings.

Those findings were to have a profound effect on the colonists and to settle the disputed matter of the rumoured safe anchorage at "Encounter Bay", once and for all.

Following the settlement of the previous controversy surrounding Colonel Light's selection of the site of the capital, a story surfaced that there was a safe anchorage at Encounter Bay. This rumour again raised the matter of an alternative settlement even though the dangers of the passage into "Lake Alexandrina" became quite evident when in December 1837 Judge Sir John Jeffcott and Captain Blenkinsop lost their lives when their boat capsized whilst attempting to cross the Bar at the sea mouth of the "Murray".

It re-emerged in 1838 when the "Fanny" under the command of Captain Gill was wrecked off the south-east coast. In obtaining help and bringing the passengers to shore Captain Gill entered the outlet several times. He later expressed the strong opinion that "it was perfectly safe for vessels of moderate tonnage to enter, asserting that no danger need be feared". This was to rouse a clamour in some quarters that a settlement be considered and caused a loss of investor confidence in Adelaide properties. It was to settle this matter that Sturt agreed to journey to the area and report his findings.

On the 11th of September 1838 he set out overland with a party that included Messrs. Bewes and Giles Strangways, and Police Inspector Inman with a detachment of men. They travelled overland via Myponga arriving at "The Fishery" on the 14th of September, at what is now "Victor Harbour", where Sturt obtained a boat and the services of a whaling Captain named "Witch". The party then split, one travelling along the coast by land, the other by boat and on the 15th they reached "Freeman's Knob" which location is now known as "Port Elliott".

On the next day Sturt set out arriving off the mouth of the outlet where he saw a line of breakers that rose a full fifteen feet before they burst on the sand bar across the mouth. He then made three attempts to enter the outlet from different directions but all failed and on one occasion the boat was almost capsized. These manoeuvres were anxiously witnessed from the shore by Inman and his party but there was nothing they could do to help.

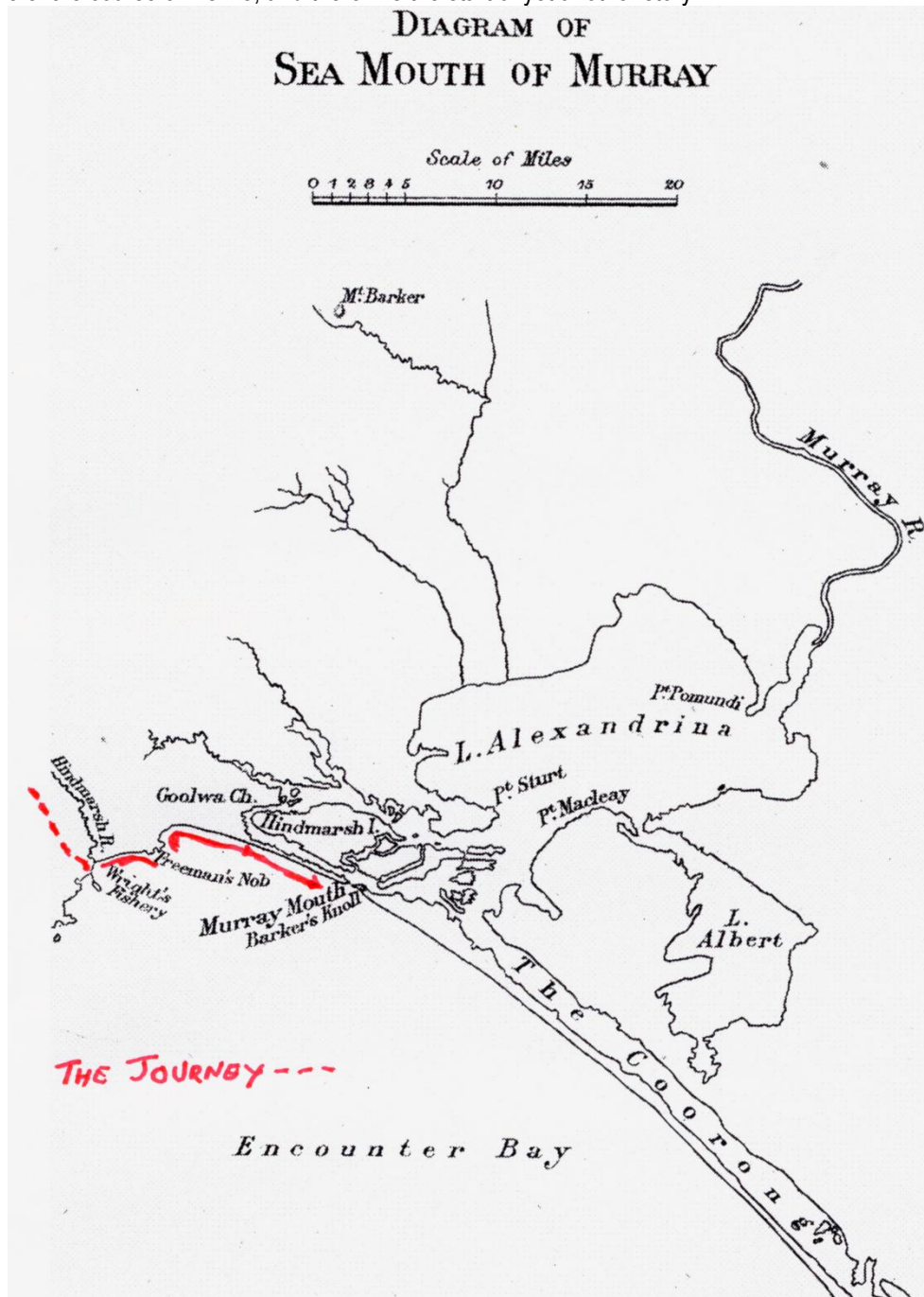


Sea Mouth of the Murray & Barker's Knoll by G.F. Angus C 1845

Sturt finally concluded that it was too dangerous to continue, abandoned any further attempts and returned to Adelaide on the 22nd of September. There he reported to the Acting Governor that the mouth could not be safely navigated and that Captain Gill was extremely fortunate in that he had been able to do so. The "Southern Australian" reported, "Every attempt has been made to establish as a truth what Captain Sturt has at last virtually declared to be a falsehood", and in the mind of the colonists the matter was finally settled.

The question being so settled, investment in land and commerce was resumed, the site of Adelaide was finally fixed and it went on to play its important part in the history of the State and ultimately the Federation of the Commonwealth of Australia.

On the 16th of October, 1838, Sturt took passage to Sydney on board the "Hope", returned to his home in New South Wales and in 1839 accepted the post of Colonial Surveyor of South Australia. This decision was to change the entire course of his life, and therein is the start of yet another story.



Sturt's 1838 Journey from "Wright's Fishery" to the "Murray" Mouth