

## STURT ADDRESS 2025

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Presented in lieu by

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### ***THE LAST EXPEDITION & STURT'S STANDING AS A NATURAL HISTORIAN.***

180 years ago on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1845, Captain Charles Sturt recorded in his expedition journal for Central Australia:

***"I could not but think we had approached to within a tangible distance of an inland sea from the extreme depression and peculiar character of the country we traversed."***

By May, two months later, the expedition had come to a standstill camped at the Depot Glen, both he and his other officers were suffering terribly from scurvy, their searching had failed to reveal any other water on the parched stony desert except for the creek where they were camped. He wrote:

***"From this period, I gave up all hope of success in any future effort I might make to escape from our dreary prison".***

Sturt did escape, returning to Adelaide in January 1846 having travelled 3,000 miles (4,828 kms) and although the expedition did not reveal an inland sea or reach the Tropic of Capricorn (23 degrees 26 minutes Longitude – just north of current day Alice Springs), it was an unmitigated success as an act of human endeavour and exploration.

It should be noted that on the return to Adelaide Sturt succumbed to a serious attack of scurvy and Dr Browne took command through the most difficult part of the journey and by using Aboriginal foods enabled Sturt to recover.

I will not go into great detail about his career and challenges he faced following his return, they are amply documented elsewhere - check Wikipedia or Australian Dictionary of Biography for details.

So let us move in our minds, without any of the physical discomforts of a Sturt expedition, to Victoria Square, in the heart of our state capital. There we find four monuments recording and acknowledging individuals important to our state.

Let us focus on two:

First: **Queen Victoria**, who is depicted seated, the stern matriarch of the British Empire, heavily robed, holding the royal sceptre and orb crowned by a tiara. A figure fitted out to display all the pomp and circumstance of her imperial power. When Sturt set off on his expedition Victoria was in the seventh year of her reign which was to continue until 1901.

In contrast our hero, **Captain Charles Sturt** is standing, life-size although he is dressed not in finery, but in the working clothes of an outback explorer. He wears working pants and worn knee boots. The sleeves of his open-necked shirt are rolled up to the elbow and his head is protected by a broad brimmed hat. Sturt leans forward, shielding his eyes from the sun with a raised right hand as he peers into the distance, a telescope and crumpled map in his left hand. He carries his tools of trade: a compass on his belt and a water bottle slung over his shoulder. It is a pity that the artist did not include in the explorer's equipment a VASCULUM – the light metal container used

by botanists to transport and protect plant specimens during field collections. An example of this botanists box is on display in the museum here.

The statue's designer was English sculptor Captain Adrian Jones (1845-1938) who was also a career soldier, veterinarian and painter. He had already produced the horse and rider of the South African War Memorial on the corner of North Terrace and King William Street, outside the gates of Government House (unveiled 1904). This much-admired work reflected his ability to sculpt people and animals in motion. The commissioning of Jones to design Sturt's statue was influenced by the success of this earlier piece.

The statue was cast at the Frome foundry in Somerset, England. The bronze panels were made in South Australia. The base and pedestal of Murray Bridge granite and Angaston marble were carved by monumental masons GE Morgan of Adelaide. It was unveiled in 1916.

Formal monuments of this kind do not generally present their subjects in such a down-to-earth poses as artist Jones does here, but I think it works well as did Sturt's daughter. However, we are not informed by the four-bronze relief panels recording the expedition members and unveiling committee, about the honours Sturt received following his Central Australian exploration.

**Captain Charles Sturt FLS, FRGS** would be his full citation with a knighthood (**KCMG**) awarded posthumously enabling his widow to become Lady Sturt.

Let me unpack this for you:

#### **FLS = Fellow of the Linnean Society**

The Linnean Society was founded in 1788 by James Smith to study and disseminate information concerning NATURAL HISTORY. A product of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment it is the oldest extant biological society and has its headquarters at Burlington House, Piccadilly, London. It is named in honour of Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who created the binomial system for classifying plants.

How did Sturt's interest in natural history first develop? Despite Sturt's father being a judge in India, his financial fortunes never rose and he had eight sons to provide for. Charles, the eldest, was sent as a child of 5 to English relatives and spent some years being educated at Harrow. He was a great reader but there were no funds to send him to Cambridge University, so a commission was arranged in the Dorsetshire Regiment – the Napier Sturt families being from that county. Sturt had an extensive military career serving in Canada fighting the Americans, Spain fighting the French, Ireland and France in an occupational force. He arrived in Australia in 1827 accompanying convicts to Sydney.

His interest in the natural world must have been noticed, as to become a member of the Linnean Society you must be proposed by other members. At the very least he must have known Robert Brown, botanist on Mathew Flinders naval exploration and survey of the Australian coast, as Sturt enlisted his help documenting the 26 previously unrecorded plants for him to classify. Similarly, his friend John Gould assisted with the correct nomenclature for the 141 birds and 10 animals Sturt had observed and where possible collected the skins. The geology and soil types he relied on his own extensive knowledge from military campaigns and travels. John Arrowsmith helped him produce the maps that his survey measurements recorded (John McDougal Stuart being the expedition's draftsman).

In Sydney he engaged with men such as Alexander McCleay and his circle including Allan Cunningham, John Oxley and Hamilton Hume. This assisted in his appointment to expeditions exploring various rivers in NSW and then in 1830 tracing the great river Murray to discover its ocean mouth here in South Australia.

Although Sturt probably entered his career as an explorer through influence, his selection was justified by results. He was a careful and accurate observer and an intelligent interpreter of what he saw.

### **RGS = Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society**

The Royal Geographical Society (RGS), originally the Geographical Society of London, was founded in 1830 to promote geographical science. In 1859, it was granted a royal charter and became known as the Royal Geographical Society. The society has a long history of supporting explorers and expeditions, including those of David Livingstone, Robert Scott, and Edmund Hillary. It also played a role in establishing geography as a university discipline.

Although Sturt was resident in Australia for only a third of his life (from 1828 -1853) he had made his mark both as an explorer and a public servant. This prestigious Society awarded him the Founders Gold Medal in 1847 In acknowledgement of his achievements in exploration of the interior of the Australian continent.

The citation reads: ***For explorations in Australia, and especially for his journey fixing the limit of Lake Torrens and penetrating into the heart of the continent to lat. 24° 30'S, long. 138° 0'E.***

The publication of his **Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia by Charles Sturt** did not occur until 1853 and in his letter to the Rt Honourable The Earl Grey, (Colonial Secretary) to whom he dedicated the work, he remarks:

***Under the present disappointment it must be gratifying to those who participated in my labours, as it is to myself, to know that they are not the less appreciated by your Lordship, because they were expended in a desert.***

### **POSTSCRIPT**

As a postscript to this statement, it should be noted that when Sturt decided to turnback from seeking the centre of the continent he was about 400 miles (640 kms) from his objective.

What he saw ***“from the summit of a sandy undulation were ridges of red sand in parallel lines beyond the range of vision and appearing interminable”.***

To have reached Central Mt Stuart would have meant crossing the Simpson Desert on foot (no horses being able to survive without fodder and water) so Sturt would certainly have perished in the attempt.

The Simpson Desert was crossed for the first and only time, 94 years later in 1941, by CT Madigan using camels. It is ironic to note that camels are often called **‘Ships of the Desert’** as they traverse the seas of sand able to withstand heat and dryness, relying on their stored reserves of fat. Since camels were not effectively imported into Australia until the 1850s they were not available to Sturt, nor could he be blamed for there being no inland sea in central Australia.