

STURT'S CENTRAL EXPEDITION OF 1844-45

Speech by Paul Hilbig to the Pioneers Association on 13 November 2019

I begin with some of the factors that gave rise to the expedition. In 1818, in a wet year, Oxley explored down the Macquarie but was stopped by the Macquarie Marshes. He commented "I feel confident we are in the vicinity of an inland sea". Others speculated that the rivers heading west from the Great Dividing Range end up in the Kimberly region where the Ord and Fitzroy enter the ocean through large estuaries. Many noted that migrating birds were flying into the centre of Australia and would not do so without the existence of some large body of water. The fact was, nobody knew what existed in the centre of the continent. There could have been a 10,000 foot high mountain range to be found. Just imagine how different Australia would be, if that had been the case.

Sturt lived during the age of heroic exploration. In Africa there were Livingston, Speke and Burton. In North America, Lewis and Clarke crossed from East to West, while Franklin and Barrow searched for the North West Passage. And wherever exploration went, colonisation followed. Sturt was a supporter of Wakefield's proposal for a colony of free settlers in Southern Australia. He wrote "the centre of a vast and untrodden, and for aught we know, a fertile region would be gained ... for who shall say what kind of country occupies the centre of the continent of Australia."

How then, did Sturt end up in South Australia? After leaving the army he became a gentleman farmer in the Canberra region, In 1838, he was among a number of people overlanding livestock to the new colony to relieve a shortage. He was impressed and decided settle here, so he went back, sold up his farm and moved to Adelaide. He became a public servant, a prominent citizen, and was awarded a grant of land here at The Grange, as a result of the fame gained by his earlier explorations.

In 1843, we find the restless Sturt proposing to the Colonial Office in London that he lead a grand 2-year expedition into the centre of Australia. The response from Sir John Barrow (of NW Passage fame) is as follows: "I know Mr. Sturt to be an intelligent and anxious man for discovery and of that sanguine disposition that never looks or cares for difficulties; and I am persuaded that if the object he has in view could be effected, he is the man to undertake it ... but what he proposes it would be little short of madness to attempt." Nevertheless, Barrow believed that there was a worthwhile geographical question to be answered and agreed to a limited expedition ... "to ascertain the existence and character of a supposed chain of hills ... trending down from NE to SW and forming a great natural division of the continent."

The party consisted of the following:

Captain Charles Sturt Leader

James Poole Assistant

John Browne Surgeon

John McD Stuart

Louis Piesse Storekeeper

Daniel Brock Specimen Collector

Robert Flood Stockman

David Morgan Ostler

John Kirby Shepherd

James Lewis Sailor

2 Servants and 4 Bullock Drivers

11 horses, 30 bullocks, 1 boat, 1 boat carriage, 1 horse dray 1 spring cart, 3 drays, 200 sheep, 4 kangaroo dogs, 2 sheep dogs plus 7 tons of provisions.

The party travelled over by now well-known country alongside the Murray and Darling to Menindee Lakes from where the journey into unknown country began. The method of travel was to send out a small party to scout around in the direction of travel and find a water source of suitable size to form a base camp or depot. The main party would then be brought up, while the advance party scouted further ahead to find the next depot. Sturt's route was from Menindee Lakes to Flood Creek, at the northern end of the Barrier Range, then to Evelyn Creek, near present day Milparinka.

By now the party was now travelling in the middle of the Australian Summer. The following quotation from Sturt's diary records some of the privations. "Every screw in our boxes has been drawn, and the horn handles of our instruments, as well as our combs, were split into fine laminae. The lead dropped out of our pencils, our signal rockets were entirely spoiled; our hair, as well as the wool on the sheep, ceased to grow, and our nails had become as brittle as glass. The flour lost more than eight percent of its original weight ... and we found it difficult to write or draw, so rapidly did the fluid dry in our pens and brushes."

With Sturt exploring ahead and water rapidly evaporating, the men left in the command of Poole were forced to dig wells in the creek bed. Poole and his men, with some time on their hands, explored further down the creek and chanced upon a rock hole which had the only permanent water within 100 kilometers. On Sturt's return the camp was moved to the water, which Sturt named Depot Glen and the creek on which it lay he named Preservation Creek. They were saved but trapped – "we have no water to fall back on, nor any that we know of to go forward to".

The privations of having nothing but meat and flour to eat, meant that the men started suffering from scurvy – Poole especially. Poole suggested that in order to keep the men busy they build a cairn on Red Hill (now Mount Poole), from which they could take survey bearings. In an attempt to escape the heat Sturt had the men to dig an underground shelter. It was 2 metres x 4 metres x 2 metres deep, and covered with brush and clay and was seven degrees cooler than outside and significantly cooler than inside any tent.

The move to depot Glen was made on 27th January 1845, with the drought finally breaking on 12th July – not quite 6 months. When the rain came, Sturt sent some of the party home under Poole's command, as his health appeared to be improving, but he died on the second day out. The party returned to Depot Glen where Poole was buried on the flat below the survey cairn the expedition had toiled to erect. Sturt later commented that "I little thought when building the cairn that I was erecting Mr. Poole's monument, but so it was; that rude structure looks over his lonely grave and will stand for ages as a record of all we suffered in the dreary region to which we were so long confined".

After Poole's burial, part of the expedition returned to Adelaide, while Sturt, with a smaller party, went north to establish Fort Grey near the SA/NSW/QLD border. From there he explored further north across Sturt's Stoney Desert, and along the eastern edge of the Simpson Desert, to a point about 150 kilometres north of present day Birdsville. He also explored east along Coopers Creek and found the waterholes so vital for the later Bourke and Wills expedition. With the thought of another summer of extreme heat and privation Sturt decided to retreat and return to Adelaide.

On completion of the cairn on Red Hill (Mt. Poole), Sturt wrote the following epitaph:

This Pyramid was raised to commemorate their *long detention* in the neighbourhood of this hill by the men attached to the Central Australian Expedition, which was fitted out under the authority of the *Right Honourable Lord Edward Stanley*, Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies and which left Adelaide in the Province of South Australia on the 10th day of August, 1844, and arrived at this place on 27th January, 1845, when its retreat and its advance having been equally cut off from the *failure of water*, it has found a safe and unmolested Resting Place on the banks of one of the neighboring creeks, three and a half miles south of this hill for sixteen weeks.

Thankful to Providence for the Mercies vouchsafed to it and putting its *humble confidence in the same benign Power*, the Expedition will resume its labours on the first fall of rain, and by pushing into the north-west Interior, will endeavor to establish its title to the name it bears, by the Achievement of an Enterprise worthy of the approval of the *enlightened Nobleman* by whom it has been sent forth.

Stranger! We have passed through this desert *without the occurrence of a single accident*, and *in peace with its inhabitants*. May your course have been equally prosperous! (my italics)

I close by making some comments about Sturt the man, by using the italicized phrases from the epitaph. 'Without a single accident' and 'in peace with its inhabitants' speak to Sturt's leadership qualities. His method of exploring was measured and cautious. He was courageous and persevering in adversity. He was gentle and kindly towards the aborigines.

'Thankful to Providence' and 'confidence in the same benign Power' show that Sturt was a practicing Christian. He was a Warden at Holy Trinity Anglican Church on North Terrace. His relationship with the men under his command and his dealings with the native inhabitants, show a man committed to Christian principles.

'Right Honourable Lord' and 'enlightened Nobleman', sound to me a bit too obsequious and deferential. Sturt had a right to feel aggrieved and overlooked by the treatment he received at the hands of government authorities. I am reminded of a quote from the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, to the effect that he "always preferred honest arrogance, over false humility". Perhaps Sturt's rightfully felt confidence in his own abilities, was taken as being pretentious by some people.

'Long detention' and 'failure of water' illustrate the fact that you learn the art of exploring from experience. To travel the Australian interior, one needs a smaller, lighter and more mobile party than that Sturt started with. Sturt acted on this realization in his journeys beyond Fort Grey. John McDougal Stuart, Sturt's deputy, following Poole's death, further developed this mobility in his expeditions that defined the route of the Overland Telegraph Line.

Exploring is a bit like carrying out a scientific experiment. An experiment may seem to be a failure, but finding out what does not work, is a very important part of the scientific process. Was the expedition a failure? The honest answer is probably yes. A geographical question was answered, some specimens of flora and fauna were brought back, but Australia did not provide what was expected of her. The thought of the whale boat being dragged all that way on its bullock cart, only to be abandoned because no inland sea was found to sail her upon, must have been quite depressing.

Success in any scientific experiment, is built upon lessons learnt from many failures. If there is a successful ending to Sturt's Central Expedition, then I think it lies in the fact that Australians have come to love and appreciate the sunburnt centre of this country. We love it to death in our 4WD's these days, as we explore all its remote corners. The role of the Charles Sturt Memorial Trust here at The Grange is to promote the achievements of the man who first showed us what the interior of Australia was really like. It was not what he expected, but he was also the first to show us the qualities that are required, if you are going to survive in this harsh environment. Courage and determination, patience and discipline, brought together under sound leadership. May Sturt remain long remembered.